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LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER

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DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL BY
WILLIAM VANCE



THE BIG SMASH

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BY **KENNETH L. SINCLAIR**

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BEST WESTERN

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FEATURING THE BEST WESTERN NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

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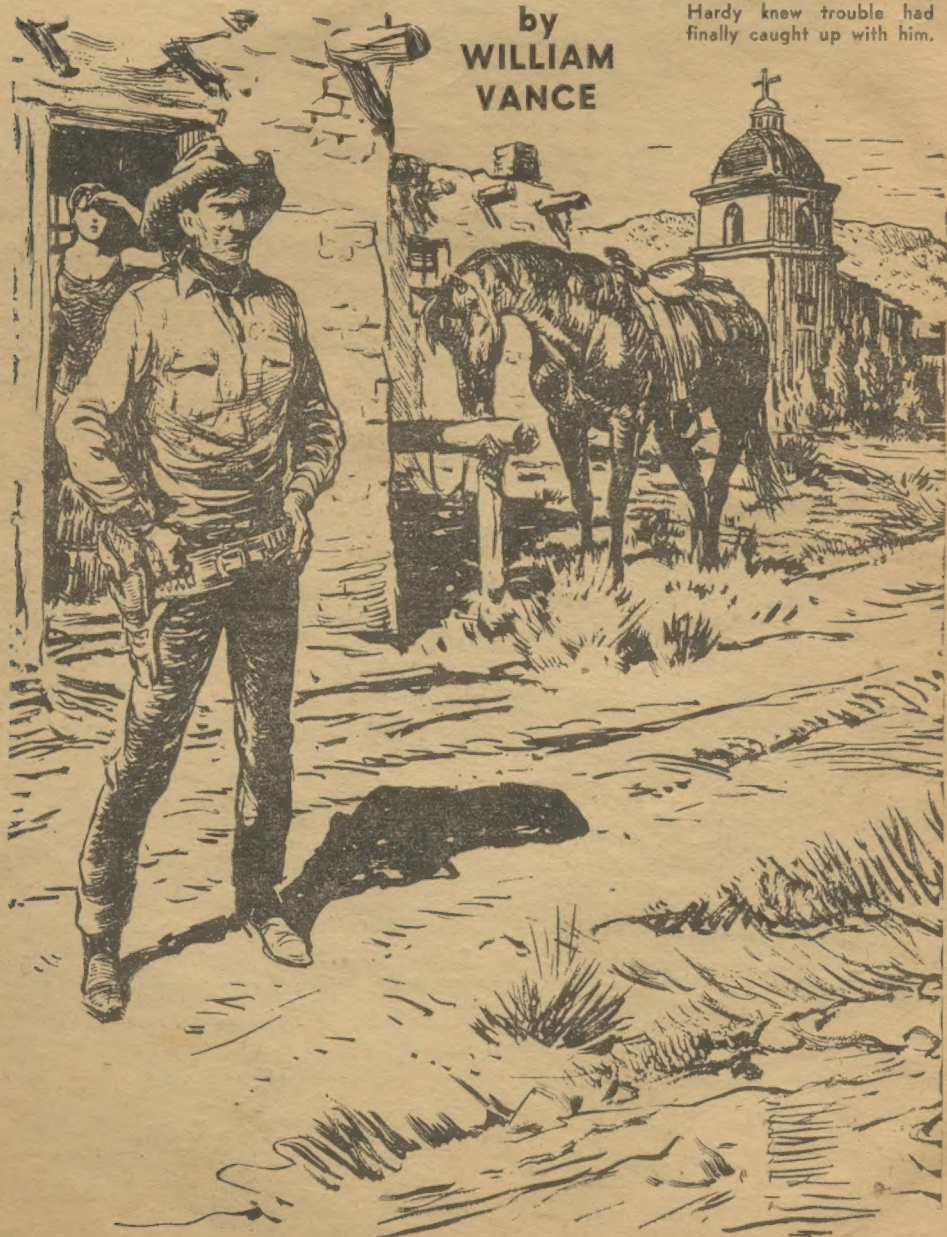
SOMEWHERE in the ragged wilds of the upper Colorado canyons, Hardy Bridges gave Hugh Giles the slip. He spent two weeks in

some of the wildest, most desolate country he'd ever seen and he traveled further than he thought possible but it was all worth it when he saw Armijo lying there in the warm sun, between two gray and red ranges. The adobes huddled together along the creek and beyond was the house of

SURE, HE HAD FAITH, THE KID TOLD THE PRIEST — IN HIS GUN DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

by
**WILLIAM
VANCE**

Hardy knew trouble had
finally caught up with him.



LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER

The Mescaleros were prowling, and the legend said they'd cursed him, but Hardy Bridges had a gun, and he wanted the gold and he wanted the girl

Gonzales, apart from the others.

He spoke to the black gelding, as he often had in the past weeks of

running from the knife-lipped Giles, a mean man on a trail. "That's it," he said through his heat-and wind-

Gregg grinned, "Howdy Bridges, been here long?"



cracked lips. He was a medium built man with a worried brown face, deliberate of action and with calm blue eyes now resting on a stone building with its cross outlined against the blue sky. The church stood on top of an outcropping of rock that looked over the entire valley. "That's it," he repeated with satisfaction.

He put the horse into motion and rode down through the black lava rock, stopping at the creek to let the horse drink and then going on to pull up before three pinkish adobes. An ancient sat in a bullhide chair, screened from the wind by an adobe wall, a straw hat covering his face. The children around his feet looked up, scrambled away with shrill cries of alarm and peered at Hardy from around the corner of the adobe wall.

The old man raised his straw hat from his face.

"Buenas Dias, Senor," he said, his bright guileless old eyes fastened on Bridges. He was brown and wrinkled as a sun-dried peach. "Dismount and rest your horse and your body."

Bridges said, in his stilted school Spanish, "Thank you sir. May I have a drink of water?"

"Surely" the old man returned and raised his voice. "Juanita!"

The girl came shyly with the dripping gourd. She was young, lissome and the single dress she wore clung to her soft young curves. Hardy's hand shook as he took the gourd from her and drank deeply. He returned the gourd and said, "Thank you, sir. I've not had that kind of water in a long time."

"You've travelled far?" the old man said politely looking at the gaunted gelding.

Bridges nodded. "I'd like to stay awhile and rest my horse before I go on," he said, "if it's all right with you."

"You may stay as you wish, sir," and the old man got to his feet. "My name is Gonzales. I am chief of the village and I live in this house and my two sons live in these two other houses with their wives and my grandchildren. My daughter Juanita cooks for me as my wife has been gone since she gave birth to my youngest." He stopped speaking and looked expectantly at Bridges.

Hardy said, "My name is Bridges. May I camp in the arroyo below the church, sir?"

Gonzales blinked. "You would be much more comfortable in the grove by the creek, sir," he said.

Bridges shrugged. "I would rather camp above," Hardy said, "if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," the old man returned. "I was thinking of your comfort. You may camp where you will."

"Thank you, sir," Bridges said and moved away, leading the gelding.

He didn't have to look at the map to know he'd come to the right place. He'd looked at it beside a hundred campfires and he'd seen it in his dreams. The only difference was the church.

On the map, the church was shown as having a tree and a round smooth boulder as high as a tall man directly in front. There was no tree but he thought, trees can be cut down. But the boulder was different. Such a boulder would be heavy and hard to move. There was no sign of the boulder. He stood there speculating on it when a black-robed figure came from around the church.

"Good day, Father," Hardy said. "I was admiring your church."

"Thank you," the priest smiled. "We enjoy it muchly."

"It is very old, is it not?" Hardy asked.

The priest nodded. "The main building is perhaps three hundred years old. The front portion is more recent. Perhaps no more than fifty."

Bridges felt his heart jump at that. That accounted for the missing tree and boulder. "I'd like to camp just below if I may," Hardy said.

The priest nodded. "Welcome," he said. He moved along the path toward the village.

Hardy made his camp and his plans at the same time. The new addition to the church covered the stairway and underground chamber. That meant he'd have to tunnel in from the side. He'd planned on that and looking around he found a deep crevice just below where he could empty the rock and dirt which he expected to excavate. He'd have to work at night. But he didn't mind, he thought. Not for

what he thought lay not more than twenty feet beyond where he made his camp.

Hugh Giles seemed a long way off at that moment and he suddenly wondered why he thought of Giles at all. He busied himself to shake the chill that Hugh Giles always brought. Giles had a reputation for not giving up a man trail.

In the time that followed, Hardy Bridges began digging his hole. He made friends with Jesus Gonzales and Father Caldero, the priest. Juanita gradually lost her shyness as she passed his camp daily, taking the sheep to better graze beyond the church.

Sometimes, Juanita left him food to vary his monotonous diet of bacon, potatoes and canned tomatoes. Sometimes, she would bring him a fresh egg or two. Only the two sons, Ramon and Felipe, were surly and unfriendly and had never spoken to him since his arrival.

CHAPTER

2

Three From Wyoming

THE BREAK came when he'd been there not more than two weeks, according to the stones he placed behind a boulder beside his camp to keep track of the days. The three men came from the direction of his own trail from Rawlins to Armijo. Of one thing he was sure. They were not lawmen.

They came out of the malpais, three of them, just before sundown, leading horses that were as gaunt and trail-worn as themselves. Hardy watched them with expesssionless blue eyes as they made camp across the finger of water. The three horses greedily reached for the green blades of grass that grew up through the black lava rock close to the water.

His black gelding, now filled out and sleek, whickered softly and Bridges said, "Don't know trouble when you see it, do you?"

Two of the men started a fire, one gathering cow chips and the other fanning with his hat. The third, a thin, wiry man, stood looking across at Bridges. He spoke a word to his companions and started across the finger of water toward Bridges. His

dusty scuffed boots splashed diamond sparkles out of the water. He stepped out of the creek and stood before Bridges.

Water dripped from his boots down on the hard-packed caleche and drained back into the creek. He had a thin, dark, tough face covered with curling black whiskers. His incisors were fang-like as he exposed them in a grin. "Howdy, Bridges," he said easily. "Been here long?"

Hardy's sandy head jerked erect. He asked, "How'd you know me?"

The thin man put out his hand. "I'm Gregg," he said. "From Rawlins. I know people who knowed old Pete."

Bridges ignored the out-thrust hand. His eyes went past Gregg to rest on the three adobes, pinkish in the afternoon sun, with red peppers hanging against the walls and pigs and chickens lazing around. One of the adobes was long and rambling, the other two smaller, housing the sons of Gonzales. He said, "Go on back, Gregg. Where you come from. There's nothing here."

Gregg laughed easily. "Long ride from here to Wyoming, Bridges. We ain't about to."

"There's nothing here," Bridges repeated. "Nothing at all."

Juanita came out of the biggest adobe and shaded her eyes from the sun with her hand. Even at a distance she was lovely.

Gregg grinned widely and evilly. "Nothing, huh? Looks all right to me, Bridges."

Hardy's long jaw tightened unpleasantly. "You're wasting your time," he said. He didn't have any hope that Gregg would listen now. "Move on. I don't want trouble."

Gregg's grin faded into nothingness. He stared at Bridges under lowering brows. "Must be here," he said and his breath quickened. "It's here all right. Or you wouldn't spook."

"Old Pete was crazy," Bridges said. "He had dreams. None of it was true, Gregg. Just move on and save yourself some trouble."

Gregg still stared at Bridges. He shook his head once and said, "Old Pete wasn't loco, Bridges. And even if he was this still looks good to me." He threw a quick look at Juanita again and turned and splashed back

through the water to the beginning of a camp.

BRIDGES watched them with a troubled wrinkle on his brown forehead. The three of them squatted around their fire, talking, eating, and now and again looking in his direction. Juanita went into the adobe.

He picked up the reins of his horse and led the animal along the trail that pushed up to the old stone church and then wandered on over the mountains to the villages of the Mescaleros. He turned off just below the church and went along the dry arroyo to his camp, just under the stone church.

He staked out the black gelding, built a small hot fire and started coffee water to heating. He fried bacon and potatoes together in an iron skillet and after he finished he cleaned his utensils and sat there drinking coffee from a tin cup and watching the dancing fire of the three men camped below, beside the water. He wondered if they placed any significance in him camping on the hill above the shade and water.

There was a sight noise out there in the darkness and Bridges got away from the fire, moving quickly as an oversized cat. He put away his gun as Gonzales stopped beside his fire, staring into the darkness where he stood. He came silently forward.

Gonzales looked as old as the hills around them. His face was a wrinkled brown, eroded and dried to a mummified mask with two bright dark eyes to enliven it. His hair was long and straight and black. He asked, "*Que tanto tiempo la ha conocido Vs a este hombre?*"

Bridges shook his head. "I do not know him, Gonzales. I have not met him before now. Nor the other two."

"These men are bad," Gonzales said slowly. "I see it written on their faces what is in their heart. And you, Senor. You always keep your horse ready and close at hand. Is that because you are bad, too?"

"Maybe I'm bad," Bridges said, half smiling. "But I'm honest. And I've not caused you trouble."

The old man nodded agreement. "You alone, no trouble," he said. "But with these others— O, that none of you had ever come."

Bridges said, "I mean you no harm, sir, not your people. I will go soon."

Gonzales moved his thin shoulders. He said, "I will hear the good padre tomorrow. Good night, sir." He was gone.

Bridges threw his cold coffee into the dying embers of his campfire. He squatted there until the fire went out. Then he moved off through the darkness as surefooted as a cat. He'd travelled this ground enough to know it.

He pulled aside the clump of mesquite. He reached into the opening and removed a pine tree top used to clean with and tossed it aside. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the opening. He measured the distance with his hands and when he reached the face he smiled with satisfaction there in the darkness. He lit a candle in a perforated can and placed it near. He took up the pick and began working.

But back of his mind, overshadowing even Hugh Giles, was Gregg and the other two. They'd got the story somehow, from someone who knew old Pete back there in Rawlins. He wondered who could have tipped them. He'd always kept to himself, from the first day when he'd arrived until the day he left. He'd made friends with no one but old Pete Trawler. The old man, dying of some chest disease had given him the map and told him how it all happened in the time when the black-robed man had pushed up from the south on their mules, building churches and telling the Indians about their God. He was sure old Pete hadn't talked to anyone inside.

Bridges filled the wicker basket with the dirt and rock he'd picked down and began backing out of the hole. There wasn't room to turn around. He reached the chill of the night wind and stood erect, lifting the basket. He carried it down the hill, taking care to go a different route each time so as not to make a trail. He dumped the basket into the crevice below and returned to his tunnel by still another route. It was slow, tedious work, but he was satisfied with his progress. Up until now. He was filled with an urgency to get the gold and be gone.

He worked steadily and methodically, not stopping even for a smoke,

until the moon was where it usually was when he quit. He used the pine tree top to brush around the entrance. He put the makeshift broom into the opening and replaced the mesquite to hide the hole. He walked down to the water and washed his face and hands and squatted there in the darkness afterward, looking across to Gregg's camp. He sat there for five minutes and then he got to his feet and tramped back to his own camp. He rolled in his blankets and slept.

Father Caldero came while he cooked breakfast. He came so silently, Hardy didn't hear him. Hardy looked up from his campfire and the calm-faced priest stood there, looking down at him and smiling.

Hardy stood up and tipped his head toward the priest.

"Good morning," Father Caldero said, still smiling. "You don't mind an early visit, Hardy?"

Bridges shook his head, an uncomfortable feeling settling on him. He said, "I don't mind. Sit down."

The priest folded his robe under him and sat on a smooth boulder. He had the sun on his back and his face was shadowed. He said, "I am afraid your staying requires some questions."

"I don't know the three men," Bridges said.

"But it appears they know you," Father Caldero said. "Jesus Gonzales is troubled. He came to me last night wanting my advice. He is the chief, you know. These things are of interest to him."

Bridges was quiet. He mentally cursed Gregg for interfering and wondered again how he'd learned about the Spanish gold.

Father Caldero sighed. "We have had no trouble for a long time. We would like for it to remain that way, my son."

Hardy said, with a hard edge to his voice, "I'm not bothering anyone."

The priest sighed again. "Jesus feels that if you go, these other men will follow. It's as simple as that."

"Ahora?"

Father Caldero nodded. "Now, it would be best, Hardy."

"Another day or so and my horse will be rested," Bridges said.

Father Caldero looked at the sleek

animal and looked back to Bridges with a grave face. He stood up. "So be it," he said and turned and walked down the trail toward the village. He stopped and came back to stand before Bridges again. "There are old legends about buried treasure in this region," he said. "The stories are many. Some of them tell of gold buried by the Spanish several hundred years ago. None of them are true, Hardy." He turned and this time he went on.

CHAPTER

3

Only More Dangerous

BRIDGES brushed aside the twinge of doubt the priest had given him. He grinned inwardly, thinking, naturally the old boy would say that. He doesn't want anyone nosing around here. Another part of Bridges' mind posed a question, asking him why Father Caldero had volunteered the information that there was no treasure. Did the priest know he'd been digging? But he couldn't know, Bridges thought. How could he know? Did priests have some inner knowledge not known to ordinary men that let them look into another's mind? He felt uncomfortable at the thought.

A plaintive bleat reached Bridges as he finished the breakfast Father Caldero had interrupted. He put aside his tin plate and cup as the first of the sheep filed by his camp, going to better graze beyond the church. He waited, his heart beginning a slow heavy thud against his ribs. He still sat there, watching the woolies going sedately along the trail. The last one passed and then she came around the rocks.

She removed the huge straw hat and leaned against the red boulder, shaded from the hot morning sun. She ran a brown hand up through her black hair, smiling at him, showing a lot of white teeth, all the whiter for her full naturally red lips. Her hair had a shine of black velvet and soft waves all the way to the tip of it, where it hung to her slim waist. It framed her face that was broad at the brow, with high cheekbones that were not sharp but full and soft.

She stopped smiling when he stood on his feet and moved toward her. Her

eyes widened and she shivered when he put his hand on her shoulder but she didn't pull away. Her eyes hardened. "They came last night," she said. "I heard them. Prowling outside like the Apache. Only more dangerous, Hardy."

He looked down into her wide eyes. They were dark, almost black, and her dusky black lashes gave them a fathomless depth. He said, "These men are bad medicine, Juanita. But I didn't think—" He stopped. It was just a way Gregg had of getting to him, he thought. In that flash yesterday, the little fang-toothed man had discerned something when Juanita had appeared in the adobe doorway. "Don't worry," he said shortly.

She was smiling again. "Right now I don't," she said. "But when you're not close that's different."

He bent his head and put his lips against her hair. "You make me feel good," he said. She did. She made him feel better than anyone he'd ever known. It was because something went out from her to him, he thought.

She smiled shyly and put her dark head against his chest. She was a tall girl for one of her race, he thought. He wondered if she too would take on weight and the dumpiness of the older women he'd seen. He couldn't visualize it. He brought his mind back to this moment. "I'll talk to Gregg," he said. "I'll tell him if he bothers you I'll kill him."

Her eyes changed, darkening. She said, "No no, Hardy. Do not say anything like that. There's three of them and only you."

"I'm used to that," he said.

She pushed away. "My sheep," she said. "They'll stray. And my father will be angry."

He kept his hand on her shoulder, holding her, the flesh warm and firm beneath his fingers. "I'm going away, Juanita," he said. "Soon. In a day or so maybe. I want you to go with me."

She didn't answer. Her dark eyes were on the ground at his feet and a sombreness was on her face.

"Don't you want to go?" he asked. She nodded, still not looking at him.

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her head. "What is it, then?" he wanted to know.

Her eyes filled and she closed them.

"You speak my language beautifully," she said, "except when you speak of killing or you ask me what is wrong."

"What then?"

"You're harsh and sound like an American."

"I am an American" he said sharply. "And when you don't open your heart to me my voice is rough. Why do you say you want to go with me and then act differently?"

She said, "My father will not approve, Hardy."

"I haven't asked him," he said. "I will."

"And if he says no?" she said in a voice that also said she knew what her father's answer would be.

"Then it's up to you," he said curtly.

"I—I can't slip away," she said, "like a thief."

"Let's wait until we got to that bridge," he said.

She tilted her head to one side. "What is this about a bridge?"

He laughed. "Just another way of saying we'll deal with it in due time."

THE THREE had made themselves comfortable in their camp. They had a blanket spread in the grove, further protected by another blanket suspended on long stakes driven into the ground.

Gregg showed his fang-toothed grin as he dealt a round of stud. He said, "Bridges, this flat-nosed feller is Lee Hoke. And that one who don't have to worry about combin' his hair is Baldy Janes. Boys, meet Bridges."

Bridges nodded to the two of them but he didn't dismiss them. They were as dangerous as Gregg. He spoke to Gregg. "Maybe we can make a deal."

Gregg still grinned. He looked at Hoke and Janes, nodding. "See? What'd I tell you?"

The others were silent, not looking at Bridges.

Gregg looked up. "Come on, set down and let's make talk. Where's that bottle, Hoke?"

"All gone," Hoke said briefly.

"Damn." Gregg swore. "Well nev' mind. What's the deal, Bridges?"

"You've got everybody excited," Bridges said. "You're spoiling the game, Gregg."

The little man still grinned, nod-

ding. "Ain't it hell?" he chuckled. He leaned confidentially toward Bridges. "That's the way it goes. Let a man start something and everybody wants to pitch in." He slapped his thigh and laughed long and loudly. The others didn't laugh or smile.

"The *jefe* and the priest run things," Bridges went on. "They've been pretty nice to me. But now they've told me to move on, thinking you'll do the same."

"Uh-huh," Gregg nodded. "You got the gold yet, Bridges?"

Hoke and Janes sat up straighter.

"No. But it won't be long. You boys pack up and ride. When I get it we'll meet somewhere and make the split."

Gregg threw back his head and laughed. His laughter stopped as suddenly as it began and he leaned toward Bridges, scowling. "Think I'm loco?" he asked. "Won't do, Bridges. Give me a better one than that."

"That's it or nothing," Bridges said and stood up.

Gregg got easily to his feet. He said, "Don't act like a damned fool, Bridges."

"I'm not smart that way," Bridges said and turned and tramped away, his back crawling.

Bridges found Gonzales in the shade of the adobe, screened from the wind by an adobe wall extended from the house. The old man returned his greeting as the children scampered from around his feet and fled to the wall where they stared at Bridges with wide, unblinking eyes.

"I'm leaving soon," Bridges said. His Spanish had been halting and stiled when he first came but now he spoke the idiom as well as the old man.

"Ai you can be over the mountain easily by nightfall," the old man said.

"Not today, or tomorrow, old one," Bridges answered. "But as soon as I can. I need corn. I need two more horses."

"What do you carry with you, sir?" the old man asked, his eyes suddenly alert and slitted.

"You have good horses," Bridges said. "I would like the strain in the horses I mean to breed."

Gonzales slumped back against the wall. "Very well. You shall have corn, all you need. And your choice from

my herd." He spat into the dust beside him. "But nothing more, sir."

Bridges sensed rather than heard another presence. He turned his head. Ramon and Felipe Gonzales stood there, squat, flat-faced and ugly looking at him in silence. He nodded and they didn't return the greeting. They had not spoken to him since his arrival. He wondered again how the same couple who'd sired these two had managed to breed a girl like Juanita.

"Nothing else," Jesus Gonzales repeated.

"I would ask you for your daughter Juanita," Bridges said. "I wish to marry her. She wants me for her husband, sir."

Gonzales muttered an oath. "I said nothing," he said. "Good day to you, sir."

Felipe moved like a brown flash, the sun glinting on his knife. Bridges stepped away and the knife sliced his shirt front. He grabbed Felipe's wrist as old Gonzales screeched, "Stop, fool! Stop, goat! Ramon, seize him!"

Bridges twisted the smaller man's arm behind his back and raised it until the knife dropped into the dust. He kicked it aside. He let Felipe go then and stepped away, not breathing heavily but his chest rose and fell. He tipped his head toward Jesus and said, "Good day, sir."

Jesus Gonzales came to his feet. "A thousand pardons, Hardy," he said somberly. He aimed a kick at Felipe. "That such a thing can happen in my house."

"Forget it," Bridges said and nodded to all of them before he tramped away.

"Wait, friend," Jesus called and hobbled after him.

Felipe and Ramon had quietly disappeared. Bridges waited and the old man came close, peering up at him. "I want to warn you, Hardy," Jesus said. "It is not good to look for gold here, friend. Only bad luck can come of it."

"Why do you think I'm looking for gold?" Bridges asked.

The old man shrugged. "What else? I think because my son violated my house I must tell you. The Mesca-leros know when the gold is threat-

ened. They have lived in peace for a few years but lately they've been watching us."

"Why?" Bridges asked, but he felt his pulse quicken. There was that in old Pete's story. There'd been a little doubt before and suddenly it vanished.

Gonzales shrugged his thin shoulders again, expressively. "You should know, friend," he said. He took a corn-husk cigarette from his pocket and put it between his bearded lips. "Take my corn and horses but go away soon. You will keep much trouble from me by doing this."

"The gold belongs to no one, old man. It's there for who will take it."

"Ai, ai," the old man twisted his hands. "You think I care for the cursed Indian gold? A thousand no's, sir, I care nothing for it. But the trouble it brings! Always, it has been that way. My father and grandfather before me have told me of it. And even I have seen it, Hardy."

Sweat beaded Bridges' long upper lip and it was not all the hot sun's doing. His guarded questions had brought no information. Now Gonzales was talking. Before, he'd never speak of the gold. Hardy said, "You should not worry, old man. It's not good for your health."

"O, that none of you had ever come," moaned Gonzales and turned back to his adobe....

CHAPTER

4

Little Deal

WHILE HARDY watered the black late that afternoon, Gregg, Hoke and Janes sat side by side at their camp across the water and watched him in moody silence. He stood beside the black and as he always did he looked toward Gonzales' adobes. He stiffened and shot a quick look toward Gregg's camp. The three of them were standing and watching Ramon and Felipe approach.

The two squat sons of Gonzales were each leading a horse, tall chestnuts that were the pride and joy of Jesus Gonzales. Each of the horses carried a sack of corn.

The two men halted a half a dozen feet from Bridges.

Felipe said, "*Mi Padre mi hizo.*"

Ramon nodded.

Hardy put down a smile. "So the old one made you?" he said. He shook his head and in his own tongue he said, "Wish to hell you'd picked another time." He looked across to Gregg and saw that the three of them were standing close together beside the creek. Bridges cursed mentally before he said, "A million thanks to all of you."

They placed the lead ropes in his hands and turned silently away. Bridges jerked the gelding back as the black reached jealous teeth toward the chestnut mares. He muttered, "Come on, you hammerhead coyote."

He staked out the three horses and began his evening meal. Afterward, he cleaned his dish, tidied the camp and then dragged his bedroll back into the rocks. He let his fire die and sat there with a blanket around his shoulders against the night chill, wanting a smoke and not taking a chance on it.

At the time he usually quit work, he had neither heard nor seen anything suspicious. He came out of the rocks then and went toward the tunnel. He removed the mesquite and the pine tree top and knelt and crawled forward to the face of the tunnel. He lighted the candle, noting it wasn't good for more than an hour or so. And he had no more.

He shook the pick loose from the face and began digging.

The sky in the east was turning gray and he was ready to call it a day when his pick plunged into nothingness. Surprised, he sat there while rank, musty air filled his nostrils. He sat there on his heels in blank wonderment for a moment with little avalanches of dirt falling around his knees.

He shoved his hand into the hole and encountered nothing. He pushed the sides of rock and dirt in, enlarging the opening. His breath came in short heavy gasps and his rapid heart-beat surged blood into his temples until they pounded. He grabbed the candle and shoved it through the hole. He could see nothing because the perforations in the can didn't give off much light. He reached inside the can and burned his fingers as he gouged out the stump of a candle. He held

it up and let the wax drip on the bottom of the can and then stuck it into its own wax and shoved the light back into the hole. The candle fell off and guttered out. He cursed.

LIGHT WAS coming into the hole from the entrance. He backed out, cursing in a frenzy of frustration. He reached the entrance and got to his feet and looked around. The three horses stood nearby, unconcernedly looking in his direction. He used the pine tree top to brush away all signs of his activity, threw it into the tunnel and replaced the mesquite. He went back to his camp.

Gregg straddled the dead campfire. He showed his yellow fangs to Bridges and said, "Gettin' a late start, Bridges? Got t' begin earlier than this, man, if you want to get anything done."

"How long you been here?" Bridges growled.

"Just got here," Gregg said. His yellow teeth disappeared. "What's up, Bridges? What about them hosses? You pullin' out?"

Bridges wondered if Gregg noticed the clay stains on his boots and knees. He turned slightly. "Nothing," he said briefly, "that means anything to you."

"Yeah, but it does," Gregg said. "Everything you do means something to me. What about them hosses? And the grain?"

"Why, I'm going to buy a ranch," Bridges said mockingly. "These horses have a strain of Arabian in 'em. I'm going to breed to them, Gregg. And the grain, that's to keep them in good shape until I get to where I'm going."

Gregg continued to stare at Bridges. He said hoarsely, "You've found it, huh?"

Bridges shook his head in negation. "No," he said. "I haven't found it."

"You're ly—" Gregg stopped suddenly, expectancy showing in his eyes. He waited a moment, alertness on him and then he said, "Man, you broke out of Rawlins a couple of months ago. Flat busted and chased by the law. Now you're talking about a hoss ranch. You wouldn't be unless you'd made a stake."

"Don't let it worry you to death," Bridges said coldly.

Gregg took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Listen, Bridges, me and you, we can make our own little deal."

"We've already talked about that."

"All right, we'll talk about another one. Just me and you. That'd make both our cuts bigger."

Bridges smiled sourly. "So you'd cross your pards?"

"It's not like they was honest jaspers," Gregg said. "They'd do the same to me."

"What's your deal, Gregg?" Bridges asked.

Gregg grinned widely. "Um, that's better. Just a fifty-fifty divvy. Me and you. You can take the gal—if you want her. You don't, I'll take her."

Bridges stuck his hands in his hip pockets and he looked down at the ground so Gregg wouldn't see his eyes. He felt a tiny muscle jumping in his jaw. "All right, Gregg," he said. "You've made a deal."

Gregg grinned jubilantly and stuck out his hand. "Put 'er there, pard."

Bridges said, "Get the devil out of my camp. I'll let you know when."

Gregg turned down the trail. He stopped as Bridges called and he turned expectantly.

"What about Hoke and Jones?" Bridges asked.

Gregg's eyes were expressionless. "I'll take care of them," he said and stared at Bridges. He added, "Don't try to pull no doublecross on me. Not with me, pard." He turned and went whistling down the trail.

CHAPTER

5

Warning

BRIDGES spent an uneasy night among the rocks above his camp. Again and again he crept out to investigate what he thought was something moving. Dark, flitting shapes, darker than the velvety night seemed to come and go. Once he heard an owl hoot and twice a coyote mourned from distant hills. Daylight found him jumpy and uneasy.

He waited expectantly after hearing the bleat of Gonzales' sheep. Juanita didn't appear on this morning. Ramon herded the sheep past Bridges' camp and ignored him as though he

was one of the red boulders that lined the trail.

After a quick and unsatisfying breakfast, Bridges climbed to the church above his camp. It lay serene and peaceful, commanding the entire valley. Bridges stood there under the massive bell tower, looking into the haze of blue distances, a discontent on him he couldn't understand.

He shrugged and went along the portico and pushed open a door that bore ancient axe marks. He went inside the church and an unearthly silence was around him. It was deserted and yet Bridges had a feeling he was being watched.

He searched the interior with his eyes, standing just inside the door, on the hard-packed caleche which bore the trace of innumerable bare feet. The pews marched forward to the altar. A candle burned, flickering anemically inside a ruby-red holder. He moved forward, his boot heels striking loudly on the hard-packed clay of the floor.

He moved past the altar and stopped in front of the little cloth-covered table that held the candle and waxen evidence of past candles. He looked around for a moment before he knelt on the split log that ran across the room, under the railing that separated the dais from the main room. He sat there for a moment and when he rose he had a candle in his hand which he thrust inside his shirt. He tramped unhurriedly toward the door, his boots striking echoes throughout the building to the accompaniment of his spur rowels.

He opened the door and stopped. He hesitated a moment and then said, "*Bueno manana, padre.*"

"Good morning to you also, Hardy," the priest answered and a tiny smile tugged at his lips. "You felt the need of a devotional no doubt. How many Hail Mary's have you said?"

Bridges shifted his feet and his spurs jingled softly. He said, "I don't know much about your business, Father."

"One needs not know about it to seek guidance," Father Caldero said. "One needs only faith."

"Oh, I've got that," Hardy said quickly.

"No doubt. In that wicked gun on

your thigh. And in the black horse below who after a month of rest is in need of more."

Hardy flushed. "A man is a fool to travel without a gun in this country. And my horse is in good shape. I go tomorrow. Good day, Father."

"Wait, Hardy," the gentle voice of the priest stopped him. "I am not blind, Hardy. There are many things I've seen since you've been here."

"Like what?" he asked bluntly.

Father Caldero put out his two hands. "Of most importance is Juanita. She is but a child."

"She's eighteen," Hardy said. "She's a woman, Father."

"In some ways," the priest agreed. "What would you do with her, Hardy?"

"I would like to marry her," Bridges said.

"So? Can you make a home for her, Hardy?"

"I can make her happy," Bridges said. "She thinks so too."

"Perhaps, for a short time," the priest said. "But you are a man who looks over his shoulder, my son. What will happen to Juanita when she's far from her people and you must run?"

"It's a short life," Bridges said. "I'm just like the next man. I want to take what I can when I can."

Father Caldero sighed. "I will talk to Jesus about this." He put out a restraining hand as Bridges stepped away. "The Apaches, they are a resentful people, Hardy. It takes little to make them break from the reservation."

BRIDGES thought of the dark flitting shadows of the night before and felt a spark of fuel added to the tension that was in him. He said, "The pony soldiers are paid to look after them."

"Agreed," the priest said. "But it's an impossible task. The Mescaleros are prowling, Hardy. I think you know why."

"Maybe they have got gold," Bridges said. "But if they have, it isn't doing them any good. Better that someone should have it who can use it."

"According to your reasoning," the priest nodded, "but not theirs. The

legend says they've cursed the gold. And any who molest it will be cursed, too."

"They're people," Hardy said. "Just people, Father."

"I didn't say I believed the legend," Father Caldero chided. "I simply repeated it. And strange things have happened here in the past."

"Thanks, Father," Bridges said, "for the warning." He turned down the trail toward his camp, more dissatisfied than ever and with a physical uneasiness gnawing at him. But he had the candle he wanted.

A fever of impatience was on him now that he was so close to what he'd come for. The day dragged with tantalizing slowness. He made himself busy at little tasks around camp. He mended a bridle and a spur strap. He did more work on the horsehair hackamore and in the evening he took the three horses to water.

Hardy followed his usual routine, except that he went to the tunnel earlier than usual. He had to do it. The nearness of the gold pulled him there. Inside, at the face, he lit the candle he'd got from the church. He put it through the hole and looked, his hand holding the candle shaking.

At first he could see nothing. He moved the candle aside and then as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he made out the coat of mail and headgear to one side. And bones. All around was the dull white gleam of bones. He put the candle inside the perforated can and enlarged the hole and squeezed through.

He stepped among the bones and passed the length of the big underground room. There was steps hewn from solid rock. He went up the steps and found the entrance sealed in. It'd be just about under the church, he thought. He went back down the steps to the main room. It was roughly twenty by twenty feet. The mass of skeletons and Spanish armor lay between Hardy's tunnel and the furnace and the stacked bars of gold. He squatted there, sweat beading his forehead, looking at the retort where the gold had been melted down and poured into bars. He lifted one, marveling at the weight of it. He scratched it with a thumbnail, thrilling at the bright mark his nail made

in the dull surface. He carried as many of the bars as he could toward the tunnel entrance.

Hardy went face first out of his tunnel for the first time, pushing the wicker basket filled with gold bars ahead of him. He felt the chill of night air on his face and he scrambled to his feet, outside the tunnel. He heard the sound and turned his head and ducked but not soon enough. The blow settled him solidly on his heels and he teetered there, weaving back and forth, fighting for his balance and then someone hit him again and he went down in a rush of blackness...

In the half-light of early morning, Bridges felt stiff and sore. He moved once and subsided with a groan. Something touched his head and he turned. It was Father Caldero.

"*Que hora es?*" Hardy struggled upright, holding himself on his two elbows. His head ached and his mouth felt furry. He looked around. Jesus Gonzales and his two sons stood nearby gazing stonily at him.

"Early morning," the priest answered. He looked at Gonzales and said, "You are sure the girl is gone."

"Yes," the old man quavered. "There is no doubt, Father."

Hardy got to his feet. "What's that?" he asked thickly. "What about Juanita?"

"They have taken her," Gonzales said. "She is not to be found and the three of them are gone. Sometime during the night. They have taken your horses, sir, and also mine."

"And the gold," Bridges said.

"Curse the gold," Gonzales said; his two sons nodded agreement.

Father Caldero said, "They have taken the gold, Hardy. But the main thing is Juanita."

"Yes, yes," Gonzales cried, "and also my horses."

"They have taken all of the horses," Felipe said stolidly.

"Only my burro is left," Ramon said, equally unemotional...

CHAPTER

6

The Gold And The Girl

THE TRAIL headed west toward the badlands. Toward a thousand miles of hell, Bridges thought, as he plodded ahead of Ra-

mon's burro. Two days west, the trail veered north.

The two brothers followed behind the burro. They had followed the trail for two days and were in high country, surrounded by rugged multi-colored hills, spotted with green coniferous trees and tremendous boulders. They found no fresh water and the water level in the gut bags went down at an alarming rate.

On the fourth day, there were smoke signals from the hills. Hardy stopped the burro and motioned.

"What's it say?" he asked.

Ramon and Felipe looked at each other. "The Mescaleros now ask the Jicarillas to assist," Ramon said. He coughed his throat clear and spat.

Felipe nodded toward a distant hill. "And the Jicarillas agree," he added.

The second smoke came from a distant peak. And as they watched a third streamer erupted toward the billowy white clouds that spotted the everlasting blue sky.

"They are close," Ramon said.

"Let's go," Bridges muttered and jerked at the lead rope.

They found Lee Hoke late that afternoon. The broken-nosed man was tied head-down to a stake. There was evidence of a small hot fire at the base of the stake. He had been scalped and his brains roasted.

From a squatting position ahead of them, Felipe called, "They have lost all their horses but the ones they ride." He spoke to Ramon. The brothers had not directly addressed Bridges since they began pursuit of Gregg.

A sense of urgency filled Bridges. "Come on, you knotheds," he growled, "let's walk instead of talk."

They ran into their first piece of luck. The black gelding had become sore-footed and had been abandoned. They found the horse grazing in a grassy arroyo. With a ringing neigh, the black trotted toward them, and came up to Bridges.

It was a rock lodged in the frog of the animal's right forehoof. It told Bridges that the Apaches were close on Gregg. So close as to panic the man. One of the horses was carrying double. The Apaches had them in sight, Bridges could tell by the trail on either side of Gregg's two horses.

He pushed on, riding the black and leaving Ramon and Felipe behind.

He found Janes about midday. The bald-headed man had been shot in the back.

"To get his horse," Bridges muttered as he stood beside the dead outlaw. That meant Gregg thought they were going too slow. And his natural greed might have had something to do with it. With Janes dead, he'd have all the gold. And the girl. He cursed and mounted the black and pushed on, reading trail from the saddle, keeping wary eyes ahead for possible ambush and always listening with a dread for the sound of gunfire that would tell him Gregg was making a stand.

New sign stopped him in late afternoon. He got off the black and knelt there in the sand, studying the prints. The Apaches had come together here, no doubt to palaver over the new set of prints that came across Gregg's trail at an angle and then wandered back, as though the newcomer had on second thought decided to trail Gregg. The Apache sign, unshod hoofprints and natural graze horse droppings, fanned out into parties on each side of the well-marked trail.

BRIDGES mounted and rode on. A half hour later he felt the black stiffen beneath him. There was a breath of sound and a sodden thud and the arrow vibrated in the gelding's neck. Bridges rolled out of the saddle as another arrow whispered over his head. The black was bucking head down and squealing with a high-pitched agonized sound as Bridges scuttled behind a cluster of rocks. He lay there breathing heavily, sweat beading his forehead, running into his eyes and burning them. He drew his gun and was about to shoot the horse when another arrow whipped into the animal and it went down and was still.

There was no movement in the rocks above and the stillness was a threat in itself. Bridges kept moving his head but he saw nothing and that nothingness was a menace that made him crawl to another cluster of rocks, above. Another arrow whined into the ground beside him as he plunged into the protection of the rocks. He stiffened as a gun exploded down below

him and he heard a faint, "Ki yi," and after that the silence seemed heavier than before.

The sun made a lot of pretty colors over the mountains beyond but Bridges wasn't thinking about them. He was thinking that the Apaches had brought Gregg and the stranger to a stand, somewhere down there in the ragged country below him. He was thinking that he'd run into the outer fringe of the Indians and they'd blame near dropped him. A wind swept down the pinion slopes and it carried a chill that made Bridges shiver. He wondered where Ramon and Felipe were and he figured he had to head them off to keep them from running into the Mescaleros and Jicarillas who'd teamed up to get their sacred gold back in its cache.

He got to a crouch and looked the land over carefully. It was dark now and he couldn't see a thing move. He went at a bent-legged run toward an adjacent cluster of rocks and nothing happened. He stopped there for a few moments and went on, his gun gripped in his sweaty hand.

There was not time to turn aside.

He swept his gun up and brought it down. Metal crunched against bone and the Apache dropped. Bridges stood there over the dead man for a moment, looking and listening. He could hear nothing other than the beating of his own heart. The Apaches must have been pulled back for the night, leaving only a few out-guards to prevent escape.

On his hands and knees, a few moments later he smelled tobacco smoke. It didn't smell like the mountain tobacco of the Indians. He whistled a few bars of the Chisholm Trail and heard the sudden excitement in a low-voiced consultation ahead. He crawled on and just outside the natural barricade he said, "White man. I'm coming in," and tumbled inside.

Juanita said, "I knew you'd come, Hardy." She came close to him and her soft hands were on his face.

He swallowed hard and said, "You're all right."

"I didn't touch her," Gregg said. "Did I, gal?"

Low-voiced, she answered, "No."

"What in blazes goin' on?" a strange voice asked.

There was light enough for Bridges to see the slit mouth of the man. "Hello, Hugh," he said quietly.

The tough-faced man leaned forward. "Bridges, by God."

"Just forget it," shrilled Gregg. "Main business now's to figure out how we goin' to get out."

"There's two men back on the trail," Bridges said. "We've got to get back to them."

"Two?" Giles chuckled quietly. "There's a half hundred bucks around us, Bridges."

"Where's the gold, Gregg?" Bridges asked.

"On my horse," Gregg said shortly.

"How many horses?"

"Three," Giles answered for Gregg. He moved a step nearer Bridges. "You give me a chase, boy. Through the damndest country I ever seen. Two weeks and not a hide or hair o' man or beast. An' then these damn Indians—what got into them?"

"Gregg has their tribal gold," Bridges said. "They want it back."

Giles was silent for a time and then he asked quietly, "What're we goin' to do?"

"Get back to the other two," Bridges said. "With two more we'll have a better chance. And I don't want them running into an ambush. They'll be my relatives some day."

"Ramon and Felipe?" Juanita asked.

"Yes," Bridges said and straightened.

"Don't be makin' any plans," Giles warned.

Bridges laughed brittlely. "I'd heard you was a bloodhound," he said. "All right, Hugh. Let's go. Gregg first. I don't want a bullet in my back."

"The hell you say," Gregg snarled. "You go first. You know the lay."

"If you know the country go ahead," Giles said. "If he acts up I'll be right behind him."

"Check," Bridges said. "I'll go first. Gregg behind me and then Juanita. You bring the horses, Hugh, and watch Gregg."

CHAPTER

7

"They Smell Blood"

BRIDGES started out. He retraced his steps as nearly as possible. The moon was high as they climbed, a yellow full ball, lighting the countryside, softening the rugged contours and throwing dark shadows across their path. Bridges stopped when he came to the dead Apache.

"We get any trouble-it'll be here," he whispered.

Giles came around Gregg and stood beside him. "How far back are these other two?" he asked. The horses were nervous and he had a moment of trouble with them.

"Don't know," Bridges said. "We'll just backtrack until we run into them." He looked closely at the horses, wondering if they sensed something he couldn't see or hear.

"Where's the Injuns?" Gregg asked.

"How the devil should I know?" Bridges answered irritably. "Let's go on." He moved away and he heard the whispering sound of an arrow mingling with Gregg's scream. He sank down, pulling Juanita against him. He had a glimpse of Gregg yanking at the arrow in his shoulder, and Giles' handgun made a yellow flash in the night, lighting up his taut face.

There was no more arrows and the night was still except for Gregg's deep-throated scared curses.

"Shut up and listen," Bridges growled.

Gregg was quiet except for his rasping breath.

Bridges was conscious of Juanita's warm body close against him and her quick breathing. He put his hand on her face. She pressed her cheek against his hand and laid her head against his arm for a moment. He said, "I guess we'd better keep moving."

"And have them pick us off?" Gregg's snarl had turned to a whine.

"Stay here then," Bridges said indifferently and moved away, with Juanita close beside him.

Gregg stumbled after him. "Not by a damn sight."

The moon had moved to the western horizon behind them when they

reached the top of the pinon-covered ridge. The sky ahead was tinged with pink that faded into gray. Ahead, a burro brayed.

"They're up ahead," Bridges said.

"Wait a minute," Gregg said.

"Them damn Injuns got burros, too."

"In their villages," Bridges said.

"Not out here."

Juanita called, "*Mi hermano!*"

Felipe came out of a clump of pinion and Ramon followed. They waited, with their flat stolid faces turned to Juanita, ignoring the others.

"Come, sister," Felipe called. "Our father will be worried greatly."

"Speak Americano," Gregg said roughly.

"They don't know it," Bridges said.

"Keep your shirttail in." He shook his head at Juanita and she didn't answer.

"Felipe, we're in one bad spot,"

Bridges said. "We must stay together. We need as many guns as we can get."

Felipe spoke to Ramon. "What is your advice?"

Ramon spat on the ground and shrugged. "What else?" he asked.

They formed a loose group and started across the rolling mesa top, heading for a gap in the mountains. The Apaches came in a rush as the sun edged over the mountain rim. The Indians were spread out and they came with barking cries as Bridges ran, dragging Juanita with him, toward the protection of rocks. The others fired too, and each time Gregg pulled the trigger he yelled a curse.

THEY GROUPED together again in the rocks, firing, watching the Indians, superb horsemen, ride between them and their horses. A big painted-faced buck pushed the burro over with his spear and another group hazed the other horses along, as a shower of arrows fell among the rocks.

Gregg shouted and jumped to his feet, reloading his gun, frothing with rage, eyes glaring. "The gold, they're taking the gold." He looked around wildly and then slid over the rocks and ran toward the horses, shooting as he ran. An arrow met him and tumbled him into the rock-strewn ground. He lay still, a thin wisp of smoke curling up from his gun muzzle and disappearing at once.

"The cursed gold," Bridges said musingly. "Everyone said it was bad medicine, Giles. I'm beginning to believe it."

"He high-jacked it from you?" Giles asked and gave Juanita a slanting look. "And took the gal too?"

"That's how it happened," Bridges nodded. "The gold belonged to the Spanish. They killed, tortured and made slaves to get it. The Indians wiped them out and covered the gold over. Their medicine men put a curse on it. The Spanish didn't give up. They came back. Rebuilt the church. I guess the ones there now only knew the legend of the gold. The vault was covered. I don't know how old Pete Trawler got the story or the map but when he was dying he gave it to me."

"That's when you broke out?" Giles asked.

Bridges nodded. "I figured I'd put in enough time for something I didn't do. Five years is a long time, Hugh."

"You should have waited," Giles said. "Your pardon came through the day after you got over the wall."

"It didn't seem important to Bridges. He grunted, "Maybe the Apaches will move on now they got their gold back."

"They smell blood," Juanita said.

"I don't know any Mex," Giles said, "but that sounded like no."

"They've lost a few bucks," Bridges nodded. "They want something back."

Giles checked his gun. "They're getting ready for another rush," he said. He looked at Bridges. "You breaking out sure messed things up. It just plumb crossed out that pardon, Hardy."

Bridges laughed. "Don't look like you or me either might give a hang about that." His grin faded. "Here they come."

The firing was a steady racket as the Indians split, riding in from all sides. The gun in Bridges' hand jumped as he squeezed the trigger. His hammer clicked on an empty and Juanita thrust another gun into his left hand and reached for his empty. He squeezed that dry and the mounted horsemen came on. With two full guns in his hands he raised a cloud of smoke as he fired both guns. The Apaches broke.

Giles counted nineteen Apaches scattered around their cairn of death. He said, "I'm out of shells for my six."

"They've lost more bucks," Bridges said glumly. "They'll probably feel like they've got to raid a settlement somewhere to make up for that. Not enough scalps among us."

On their next rush, two Apache bucks made it up to the cluster of rocks. One of them was the big paint-smearing warrior who'd spared the burro. Bridges hit him between the eyes with his empty pistol and he went down with a withering scream. Ramon knifed the other and got a knife slash across his face.

"One more round for my saddle gun," Giles said, sighing.

"Not much more than that for any of us," Bridges answered.

THE MESA top was quiet. The hours dragged. The sun beat down and huge green flies buzzed back and forth between the dead and living.

"What're they waiting for?" Giles asked in a husky dry voice.

"They can wait us out," Bridges answered. "They're losing too many men, Hugh. They'd rather starve us out." He turned to Juanita. "Can you make a noise like a hawk?"

"What'd you ask her?" Giles raised his head suspiciously.

Bridges laughed. "You're too much law, Hugh. I asked her if she could make a hawk call."

They both looked at her. She nodded and put her two hands over her mouth and emitted a shrill cry that was a lonely noise on the mesa top.

"Keep it up," Bridges said.

She continued the cry and they saw motion in the rocks around them.

"What's it for?" Giles asked.

Bridges shook his head. "Dunno, Hugh. They just think hawks and eagles and such are spirits or something. Just want to stir them up. Beats setting."

"Amen," said Giles. After a long silence he said, "I'd sure as the devil liked to have had you on my side."

"Me, too," Bridges answered. He looked at Juanita. She sat with her head raised, looking off into the purple distance. Suddenly she touched

(continued on page 31)

THE FORT MCKENZIE MASSACRE

by NOEL M. LOOMIS

ONE OF THE earliest cold-blooded massacres of Indians took place in the winter of 1843 or 1844 at Fort McKenzie in Blackfeet territory in the mountain area of Montana. It resulted from the rashness of impetuosity of Francois A. Chardon, an *engage* of the American Fur Company, and caused the ultimate burning of Fort McKenzie and the removal of the fur post to a new location...

Forts at that time, in Missouri country, were not usually military establishments, but block-houses and stockades defended by fur company employees. Fort McKenzie, in the heart of the stamping ground of the savage Blackfeet, was the farthest outpost east of the Rocky Mountains, and its existence depended to a large extent on trade with the three Blackfeet tribes—the Bloods, Piegans, and Siksika or Blackfeet proper.

In those years the traders were not allowed to go into the Indian camps looking for furs; all business had to be conducted at a "fort" or at an outpost allowed by the Indian agent. There was, however, no law against

be hard to persuade, they sent out a sled with a small keg of alcohol or whisky, and a band flying a large American flag. The band included a clarionette, drum, violin, and triangle. Helped along by the sleigh-bells, it was very effective with the Indians.

Chardon, it is said, frequently played the drum in this sort of greeting—surely one of the earliest Chamber of Commerce welcoming committees on record in the West.

A treaty of peace between the Blackfeet and the American Fur Company—but actually, from its appearance, an attempt by the fur company to bring peace between the Blackfeet and the Assiniboines—was signed in 1831 by "H. Chardon", who may have been Francois, for no other Chardon appears in the journals of those years.

Chardon, the man responsible for the massacre at Fort McKenzie, was an old hand with the Indians. He had traded for years with the Osages on the Lower Missouri, and went to the Upper Missouri around 1824. His name appears frequently in journals of travelers from Fort Pierre to Fort



A war party of twenty Blackfeet started it, doubtless having a massacre of their own in mind. Francois A. Chardon ended it . . .

inviting Indians to the fort, so the enterprising traders kept pickets out in every direction. When a picket sighted Indians with furs, he signaled the fort, and the man in charge promptly sent out men with pack horses. These men were well supplied with vermilion and tobacco, and did not spare their horses to reach the Indians quickly.

The traders would load the furs and robes on their own horses and head for home. If a party was big, and especially if the chiefs were known to

Clark to Fort Union to Fort McKenzie. He must have been capable, if somewhat rash and impetuous.

John James Audubon reports an event in 1843 that indicates how well Chardon had adapted himself to the savage country. A buffalo had been killed, and was brought onto the deck of the boat to be butchered. One of the stomachs was cut out and "partially washed in a bucket of water", and one of the Indians ate a large part of it. Chardon, said Audubon, ate the rest, uncleaned.

Audubon was a little more fastidious. He tried a piece, thoroughly cleaned, and found to his astonishment that it tasted good, but the idea, he insists, was repulsive to him.

ON THE WAY upriver from Fort Pierre, Chardon went with Audubon, and after they had finished wooding about 15 miles upstream, Chardon told the captain there was on board an Indian whom he had once flogged at one of the upriver stations, and that he felt sure the Indian intended to kill him. From Chardon's words, the Indian must have been a stowaway. The captain ran the boat to the west side of the river, the Indian's pack was thrown onto the bank, and Chardon himself pushed the Indian overboard into waist-deep water. One of the men with Audubon remarked that it would never be forgotten by the Indian, and that Chardon was enough of an Indian to remember it too, so that probably sooner or later one of them would kill the other.

Audubon himself said this Indian was armed with a knife (which was by no means unusual, for an Indian in that country was undressed without a knife). However, it is possible that a condition of transportation on company boats was that Indians should not carry weapons. Audubon says this Indian made his way back to Fort Pierre—which is just across the river from the present town of Pierre, S. D.

A short time later Chardon showed Audubon some Assiniboin burial platforms. (Most of the Northwest Plains Indians buried in trees or on platforms; some of them had a morbid fear of burial in the ground.) Audubon discussed with them the best time and means of obtaining the skulls for scientific purposes. The coffins were in trees, about ten feet from the ground, old and decayed. They assumed there would be six or seven skulls, and the best time to take them would be about dark. It does not seem to be recorded whether they returned that night.

This does, however, demonstrate the feeling of the early frontiersmen: an Indian was an Indian, and a corpse was a corpse, white or red.

Sometime later Chardon took Audu-

bon some Arikara skulls, which were gratefully accepted.

Chardon was at Fort Clark in 1837 when the company steamer brought smallpox to the Missouri country, and did his best to stop the infection of the Indians, but without success. Chardon himself contracted the disease and was left for dead, but a clerk saw some sign of life and fed him whisky with nutmeg and hot water. He went to sleep, and when he awoke he was better. He said the pains had begun in the small of his back and the back of his head, and had been severe.

Chardon had a son on that same boat, by which it may be assumed he was married—most likely to an Indian woman.

Many writers tell of the smallpox epidemic of 1837. One says a young Mandan ran up and shot a man sitting next to Chardon and killed him instantly. Perhaps the shot was intended for Chardon. The Indian ran toward the mass graves of his people but was pursued and overtaken by the whites. He begged them not to kill him until he reached the grave—which favor Chardon granted.

It was during this smallpox epidemic that a Mandan chief planned to kill Chardon, believing that, because the Arikaras had not yet contracted the disease, the whites had deliberately thrust it on the Mandans. A number of Mandan chiefs came to talk, likely with the intention of killing him, but while he was sitting among them, a dove, chased by a hawk, alighted on his arm to catch its breath.

THE INDIANS, always superstitious, demanded to know the meaning of this powerful omen, and Chardon told them it had been sent by the white men to find out if the Indians had killed him; he told them he had assured the dove the Mandans were his friends and would never harm him.

The Mandans accepted that explanation, and looked on Chardon with great awe, having seen that his medicine was very powerful. The Arikaras, incidentally, did develop the disease and suffered almost as much as the Mandans.

In 1838 Charles Larpenteur en-

countered Chardon at Fort Clark on the lower half of the Upper Missouri. They had come through the breaking ice and their nerves were taut. Therefore someone produced a two-gallon keg of good whisky, and Chardon helped himself to a good many doses—one about every quarter hour—because of the “worms in his throat.”

The second day very nearly saw the bottom of the keg, and Chardon wanted them to stay longer so he could do a clean job on it, but they presented the remainder of the liquor to him and took off up the river.

In 1834 Chardon was appointed to take charge of Fort McKenzie. He was expected to be very successful because of his long experience, but at the new fort he did not turn out well. The Blackfeet were not as easy to deal with as the Mandans and Arikaras, and perhaps, being at the end of the world and away from supervision, he was at a loss. At any rate, he leaned heavily for advice on a man named Harvey who has been given a very poor reputation by those who were on the Upper Missouri in those years, and this led to his eventual undoing.

The Blackfeet were a powerful nation, proud, fierce, warlike, as Major Culbertson had understood before Chardon.

Oddly enough, it had been just ten years before when Culbertson, in charge of the same post, was besieged by a large party of Crows, who camped around the small fort in all directions and constantly kept it surrounded and under watch. No shot was fired; it was a siege by intimidation. Culbertson had not allowed his own men to fire on the Indians until the fort had been under siege for ten days and without food for three, when Culbertson finally fired one cannon ball and dispersed the entire band. Chardon, ten years later, was not as patient nor as humane.

It was not Chardon's first time at Fort McKenzie. He had been there in February, 1832, when there had been a disastrous fire at the fort. All the buildings on the west side were burned; this included five rooms, for it was customary to build the rooms along the sides either within the stockade or as a part of it. They lost

800 hand-hewn planks and 1,000 dried buffalo tongues, which burned freely. The powder magazine held 2,000 pounds of gunpowder, and for a while it was feared the fire would reach the magazine and destroy the fort completely, but an east wind kept it back.

Most of the meat stores were saved, and soon after the fire the men felled 270 trees and put up new palisades in place of those burned or partly burned. The new ones were built “with a basis of brickwork”, and a hewn stone magazine, with a capacity of 50,000 pounds of powder, was erected.

IN JANUARY, however, of the first year Chardon was in complete charge (1844) a war party of twenty Blackfeet asked admittance to the fort, but were not allowed to enter. As they left, indignant at being refused, for they not improbably had visions massacring the inhabitants and gathering a great deal of loot, they killed a pig.

Harvey advised immediate retaliation, and Chardon agreed. They took six men and trailed the Indians. But the Blackfeet discovered they were followed and set an ambush. Then a Negro named Reese, a member of Chardon's group, crawled to the top of a hill to look the situation over, and was promptly shot in the forehead and killed.

The party now returned to the fort with Reese's body. Chardon, urged on by Harvey, swore bloody revenge, but Culbertson's good-will policy was so well known at the fort and so respected that the two men were afraid to publicize their plans for revenge, and took into their confidence only five or six others.

Fort McKenzie was about 200 feet square and faced the river. It was built of logs set upright in the ground—a palisade—which completely enclosed the area. At the upriver corner of the front side was a bastion—a two-story tower, the upper story of which projected two feet over the lower, to enable the defenders to shoot down at Indians trying to scale the wall or set fire to it. Part of the palisade was framed with heavy timbers, and in the front was a massive double gate,

through which Indians must enter for trading purposes.

The cannon in the bastion that covered the main entrance was now surreptitiously loaded with 150 half-ounce lead balls, and Chardon and Harvey sat down to await the arrival of a party of Blackfeet—any party, just so they were unsuspecting.

There was considerable trading traffic at that time, and soon a large band of Blackfeet warriors and squaws came up with furs and buffalo robes to trade. The three chiefs of the band were admitted, but the others were told to assemble at the gate. The Blackfeet, suspecting nothing—for after all the white man's ways were rather queer—gathered at the gate, happily awaiting the trading and, possibly, the alcohol that would soon flow.

Harvey was posted by the cannon in the bastion with his pistol in his hand. When the crowd below was dense enough to satisfy him, he discharged his pistol into the vent of the cannon. He was taking no chances on a piece of punk.

The cannon thundered; 150 bullets ripped through the waiting Blackfeet. The wounded screamed, warriors roared, and squaws shrieked in terror. The crowd melted, running in all directions.

Twenty-one dead Blackfeet were left on the ground, and a dozen others limped or crawled away with severe wounds. The gates were now thrown open, and those of the garrison who had been taken into the massacre plot rushed out. They caught a number of the wounded and killed them.

Three men had been assigned to kill the three chiefs taken inside the fort, but they "through cowardice" neglected to carry through the murders. The chiefs, hearing the discharge of the cannon and the cries of their people, got over the pickets of the stockade and out of sight before they could be killed.

Now, having perpetrated one of the most barbarous acts up to that time, Chardon's men went all the way. They seized all the pelts and a good many of the Blackfeet horses, and then tore off the scalps of thirty victims who lay before the walls. With this preliminary taken care of, that night, in the weird light of huge

wood fires, they held a scalp dance! Probably fortified with whisky, they danced and howled and shrieked a good part of the night. It must have been such a scene as imaginative artists had been painting of the Eastern Indians for some two hundred years.

WAR HAD now begun in a manner similar to Pearl Harbor, and Chardon, showing caution, prepared to abandon Fort McKenzie. It had been established in 1831, and for ten years had been one of the most profitable trading posts maintained by the American Fur Company.

Chardon sent a secret party to the mouth of the Judith River, some distance below, and there a new stockade was quickly built. Within six weeks it was named Fort F. A. C. after Chardon; soon after that, on April 15, the ice broke up in the river, and Chardon and Harvey loaded all the goods and equipment of Fort McKenzie into boats and went down the river, putting the torch to Fort McKenzie and leaving it in flames.

Fort McKenzie soon became known as Fort Brule or Burnt Fort.

At Fort F. A. C. they attempted to re-establish trade, but only the Pie-gans appeared, and they were in smaller numbers that finally diminished to nothing. Now there were no trading parties of Indians, but hostile bands of raiders, taking horses and cattle, killing every white man they could put their hands on. A number of the garrison of Fort F. A. C. were killed, and the rest were scared, so that none ventured forth except of absolute necessity, and the fort was practically in a state of siege.

Harvey's advice and Chardon's bad judgment now resulted in almost total loss of all the Blackfeet trade, and in May, Chardon took the keelboat to Fort Union with very meager "returns"—as the robes and furs were called—and reported the unhappy conditions on the upper river.

The company was alarmed at the loss of trade, and tried to send Major Culbertson back to Fort F. A. C. But Culbertson, who had been happy there and had not wanted to be transferred at all (he was moved to Fort Laramie), did not want to return, so Chardon was sent back.

(continued on page 31)

WHEN TRAILS DIVIDE

by
**GEORGE
H.
ROULSTON**



Bill had been caught red-handed with a hot running iron in his hand.

The sheriff warned him and so did his wife — his old saddlepard Bill Leggit was no good, an outlaw. But Ed Lakeman didn't take friendship lightly

IT HAD begun to snow in the mountains when Ed Lakeman saddled his bay horse to ride into town to meet Bill Leggit. His wife, Martha, was standing on the front porch, her arms folded across her bosom the way she always did when she was mad. Ed turned and studied her for a brief moment with fear and doubt pounding inside him.

His horse stamped its hooves against the frost-ribbed clods, and the wind, a knife edge cutting from the north, kicked the dry leaves against the barn with a harsh dry rattle. Ed listened to these sounds for a moment and recalled the old days spent with Bill.

"I guess I owe it to Bill," he said half aloud and climbed into the saddle, its leather creaking against his weight.

When Ed rode up the steep path to the front porch, he knew he couldn't explain to Martha his loyalty to Bill. He had tried ever since he learned that Bill was getting out of prison, and he'd failed.

"Are you still going to meet him?" Martha asked.

He saw that her lips were set in an angry line and he avoided the temper flashing in her eyes by stroking the bay's mane.

"I guess so," he said, slowly and uneasily. "Bill and me were partners—

I—I can't forget that. Now that he's getting out, I think—"

"I'm thinking of Dan," she said and wheeled into the house and slammed the door.

Ed rode on through the gate and he realized that this was the first time that he had ever ridden off without kissing Martha good-by. Martha and her dad both hated Bill and now that Bill was getting out, they hated him even more. But despite what they had said, he had to be there when Bill got off the train.

He reached Galt shortly before noon, and turned his bay into Smith's livery stable. Ed swung from his saddle just inside the huge double doors; a tall lean man in his early thirties, dressed in worn jeans and a canvas jumper.

When he started across town towards the depot, he saw Bud Harley, the wrangler for the A Bar outfit, jog past and wave at him. Bud was wearing out another A Bar horse trying to see his girl and be back in one day and the A Bar would probably be as happy as Bud when he got married and settled down.

ED WONDERED if the five years in prison had changed Bill very much. It was the winter after Ed had married Martha that Bill had been caught redhanded, bent over a Freeman steer with a hot running iron in his hand.

Ed saw Sheriff Frank Ellis standing against the depot, out of the raw wind that skimmed down the tracks. Ed cut through the row of raw timbered cattle pens to the drab yellow box-car shaped building.

"Here to greet the new arrival?" Ellis asked, his thumbs hooked in his suspender straps, exposing the bronze star on his shirt flap. Ed Lakeman felt the sting of sarcasm in Ellis' voice and it made his face redden.

"I reckon," Ed answered after a moment's silence and he leaned against the wall beside the sheriff.

"Just out of curiosity, Sheriff," Ed asked slowly, "are you planning on riding Bill or are you going to leave him alone?"

He saw Ellis' high forehead crease in deep thought. The wind whined around the corners of the building,

laden with sand and grit from the road. The cattle in the loading pens stirred uneasily and rattled their horns against the posts. Finally, Ellis raised his head and stared across the shallow ravine at Galt.

"Not unless he asks for it," Ellis answered. Ed felt relief.

"Well, Bill and me have been friends ever since I left Kentucky and came out here ten years ago. Bill took a liking to me and he taught me a lot of cow savvy. I reckon I'll try and help him all I can."

He heard the faint whistle, rolling flat and clear across the valley, and glanced up to see the train coming out of the gray distance. Its roof blanketed with snow from the pass. Ellis shook his gray head and shifted his position against the wall.

"You always was a damfool about him and I ain't saying he's all bad. He couldn't be or else you two wouldn't have stuck together as long as you did. But you've got a nice outfit going and a family now. If you get too thick with Bill, you stand a chance of getting into trouble and losing everything.

"And Bill won't appreciate your help one blame bit. Besides, Bill ain't got much of a chance to start over here anyway—too many people remember Dan Freeman getting murdered and they still think Bill done it. Bill would be better off if he'd put about three states between him and here."

Ed felt a knot tightened inside him. Ellis was repeating what Martha and her dad had been saying. Two weeks before Bill had been caught, Dan Freeman, Jim Freeman's only son, had been shot in the back by an unknown rustler. Martha had told him that if he ever brought Bill to the ranch she would leave him. She couldn't forget her brother's killing and she still believed that it had been Bill Leggit.

THE TRAIN jerked still for a brief whistle stop and a drummer, short and puffy, got off and Bill swung slowly off onto the platform. The train began to rattle away.

"Hello, Bill," Ed said slowly and held out his hand. He felt a lump growing in his throat because he

could remember the good times that they'd had together, and he felt that Bill was remembering them too. Bill glanced sharp-eyed up at him, and the tense grim lines shrunk from his face for a moment.

"Howdy, Kid. It's good to see you again," Bill answered. He gave Ellis a quick cold glance and said to Ed. "Got a smoke?"

"Keep it," Ed replied, handing Bill his tobacco sack.

"Thanks," Bill answered. "That five dollars walk-away money they give you don't go very far." He made a square-shouldered turn towards Ellis. "Evenin', Sheriff."

"Glad you're back, Bill," Ellis nodded. "When you get a chance drop into my office for a talk."

Ed watched Bill's nostrils flare with sudden anger and the thin veins around his mouth turned stormy red.

"Is that an order?" Bill snapped.

"It's a request," Ellis answered. "But I can make it an order."

"I'll come." Bill's quick anger ebbed and flowed and his voice was sullen and deadly quiet. "I just don't like being pushed around. I've had enough of that."

Bill rolled a cigarette and watched Ellis stomp away with narrow blazing eyes. Ed studied his friend and was surprised at what he saw. Five years had left their hard bitter mark on Bill. There was a gray tinge at his temples and his face was pasty white and sagged with deep wrinkles. All traces of Bill's wry humor was gone. Instead, on Bill's face was suspicion, hate, and quiet desperation. Ed caught Bill's glance and was aware that Bill's eyes were narrowed to stormy slits. Maybe, after he's been out awhile, Ed thought, it'll be different—

"I don't like being pushed around," Bill repeated, glaring after the sheriff. "I've had enough of that."

Ed felt uncomfortable under Bill's sullen glance and he knew that something was undercurrent in Bill's mind. Ed said, "Let's eat."

They started towards Charlie Ling's cafe. Ed talked about the old days when they had punched cattle together, but he received only brief grunts from Bill. Bill walked, braced against the sand pitted wind, feeling

the town's curious glances following him, and Ed knew that Bill was still walking within the grim shadows of prison walls. The chip on Bill's shoulder was a plain and dangerous thing.

"Gimme a steak," Bill said to Ling when they sat down at the far end of the counter. When Ling padded away, Bill said, "I guess you're still eating out of Freeman's hand."

"I'm still married to Martha if that's what you mean," Ed answered evenly.

"You hit it lucky, Kid," Bill continued, rolling another smoke. "You're married to the only daughter of a well-set rancher. You know, he never would have missed those steers that I tried to take. I'll bet he got his start himself by swinging a wide loop."

"It could be," Ed replied.

Bill gave a short ugly laugh.

LING PADDED up with their steaks and Ed watched Bill spread a layer of catsup over his and cut hungrily into it. Ed ate slowly; trying to pick up the pieces of the past and put them together so that they made sense today. But the five years' break made a big difference in their friendship.

"You know," Bill said, reaching for his coffee, "a feller that punches cattle is just about like the horses he rides. The only difference is that a rancher will turn a horse out to pasture when it gets old. But a puncher who gets too old to work winds up swamping out bars or something." Bill shook his head, "That ain't for me."

Ed switched the subject; knowing what was coming up next. It had lain behind Bill's running off some of Freeman's cattle.

"I can get you a job with the Circle C if you want it, and I'll stake you to a horse."

"What's the matter with your outfit or the Freeman's? Don't old man Freeman want me around?" Bill's mouth was fashioned into a hard grin. Ed hesitated. It was the truth, yet he couldn't admit it.

"Well—er—we're full up for the winter now," he lied. "Maybe later on—in the spring, maybe."

He realized that Bill knew he was lying. Bill shook his head and his eyes glittered like mid-winter ice.

"It ain't for me anyway, Kid. I know what'll happen if I hang around here. Everytime some steer disappears, they'll claim I stole it. You just give me that horse and some money and I'll make tracks out of here."

"How much will you need?" Ed drew a sharp breath.

"Well, that damn judge threw the book at me thanks to Jim Freeman's pressure, so I figure about five hundred dollars ought to square accounts with Freeman. It ought to be worth that much to him to get rid of me."

Ed sucked in his breath. He was caught in a bind. No matter which way he turned, he'd be hurting someone. Behind Bill's words was a threat. If he gave Bill the money, it would mean a skimpy winter and the extra room that Martha wanted would have to wait. But it meant that Bill would leave and if he stayed around here, he'd wind up in trouble.

"All right," Ed said finally. "I'll get the money for you. But I'll have to ride out to the ranch and get it."

"You ain't planning on leaving me flat, are you, Kid?" Bill's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Because if you are, I've got my own ways of raising a stake."

"I'm not leaving you flat," Ed answered. "The horse and your gear are over at the livery stable." He reached into his pocket and handed Bill a five dollar gold piece. "Here, take this and I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"I'll see you then," Bill snapped.

He got up and without offering to pay for his meal, left abruptly. Ed paid Ling and wondered if Bill had gambled away the five dollars that the warden had given him.

THERE WERE faint traces of falling snow as he left town and before he was five miles from Galt, it started falling hard. He rode through thick sheets of it to the ranch, stopping occasionally to scrape the balls of fresh snow and mud that caked beneath the horse's hooves.

He caught a glimpse of the ranch lights shining out through the falling

snow at him. During the past years, they had seemed warm and friendly; always a welcome sight. But tonight, he dreaded facing Martha.

When he had bought the ranch, six years ago, men had told him that no one had ever made it pay and that he would go broke too. It was poor range that had been badly overstocked, but by careful grazing he had made it pay. Last year, a carload of his steers had taken second prize at the stock show. He was slowly building a rep for having good cattle and some of his animals were beginning to return the fancy prices he had paid for them.

He left his horse in the barn and started up the path to the house. Martha had heard him ride in and she came running to meet him; one of his worn jackets thrown over her shoulders. Snowflakes were like lace spangles in her hair and Ed caught her in his arms and she buried her face against his shoulder.

"I—I thought you had gone for good," she said, fighting to hold back the tears. "You've always talked about the good times you and he had drifting."

Then with an abruptness that was characteristic of the Freemans, she let go of him and walked silently beside him to the house. He watched her, always a little awed by her, and he wondered again how he had been lucky enough to win a girl like her.

"I left him in town," he said, when they reached the house. In the warmth of the kitchen, he faced her, and slowly picked his words.

"Martha, Bill wants to leave the country—you know—go someplace else and start all over again. He's done a lot for me, and now I'm in a place where I can repay him." Ed paused awkwardly for a moment, wondering if this was the best way to tell her.

"Martha, Bill wants me to loan him five hundred dollars."

He watched her back stiffen with unspoken anger. They had weathered six years together and she had left a far better house to come to this two-room cabin to make a home with him. There was the strong tie of those years together and the bond of a baby buried a year ago. Yet as he

faced her now, despite all these things, Ed Lakeman felt that they had reached the breaking point. A tight moment passed and finally she lifted her glance from the kitchen range.

"It's your money, Ed," she said in a too quiet voice. "Do as you like with it."

He felt shame tingling in his cheeks as he took the money from the baking powder can that was hid in the cupboard. He counted it out very carefully, putting the small remainder back. When he shut the cupboard door, he rose and walked over to where she stood, stiff and silent.

He kissed her and found that her lips were cold and she didn't move or close her eyes. Staring straight ahead, twisting her hands beneath her apron. It wasn't the money, he knew, for in her eyes he saw the memory of Dan and the belief that the money that she had helped work so hard for was going to be given to the man who had misled him.

Ed left without saying good-by. He saddled a fresh horse, a blaze-face roan, and started for town at a gallop. The snow was dropping fast out of an ink black sky and already a foot deep. A white blanket that covered the rock scared earth.

SOMEWAY, he'd have to square things with Martha. He was relieved that Bill was going to leave and yet sorry to see him go. But they could never be friends again. Martha would always stand between them, never letting her hate die.

If he was single, he could tie his gatherings on a horse and say, "Let's go, Bill," and keep riding until they found a range that struck their fancy. Before long, Bill would be riding free and easy like that again. Prison and the rest would be forgotten. A man couldn't keep much hate bottled up inside him when he was riding a good horse and had fresh air blowing in his face.

Before long, Bill would be his old self again and he'd probably send the money back. It'd help to keep Bill out of trouble. If Bill stayed around Galt and got a few drinks in him, he might start gunning for Jim Freeman.

Near town, Ed was snapped from his thoughts by the soft thudding of hooves coming towards him and he pulled his horse into a thicket. From the cover, he watched Sheriff Ellis and four other men turn north on the Commissary road and the words "Halfway Corners" floated back to him. Ed waited until their sounds faded into silence and nothing remained but the shrill yelp of a coyote on a distant ridge before he rode on.

"What happened?" he asked Smith, when he turned into the livery yard and dismounted.

"Somebody held up the Andrews store at Halfway Corners this afternoon," Smith answered, taking Ed's horse. "Old Man Hemphy went for his six-gun under the counter and the outlaw shot him. Nobody saw it, so they don't know who did it."

"He was a nice old man," Ed said regretfully. "I always liked him."

"Past seventy," Smith commented. "But still had the guts to reach for a gun."

"He should have forked over the money." Ed made an odd sound in his throat. "Andrews never would have missed it."

"Old Ben was one of those old-timers. About one of the first men in these parts," Smith shook his head. "I guess it was a matter of pride with him. Andrews is putting up a five hundred dollar reward for the killer."

They paused in the stable's open doorway and Ed nodded towards his horse.

"He's pretty sweaty. Maybe I'd better walk him before I put him up."

"Suit yourself," Smith shuffled off into the darkness towards his house next door.

ED LEFT his horse in a stall and went through the stable runway to the corral in back. He circled quietly through the loose horses until he cornered the sorrel that he had brought into town for Bill. He rubbed his hand across the sorrel's withers and back and discovered that it had been ridden hard during the day.

Grim-lipped, and with a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, Ed returned to the stable. He struck

a match, a sputtering flare in the murky darkness, and found Bill's saddle hung on the wall. He had kept it while Bill had been in prison. Ed searched the saddle bags and then shook the match out. Bill's six-gun was missing.

It don't mean a thing, Ed told himself. He stood in the shadows and tried to fight off the suspicion that kept growing stronger. He went out into the snow with a tight dry knot forming inside him. It don't mean anything, he repeated, but he knew that he couldn't just cross it off.

His lips were pressed into a thin worried line as he walked up Grant street and crossed over to the Hoof and Horn Saloon that stood in the corner. It was past midnight and ordinarily the place would have been closed an hour ago, but Ben Hempty's killing was keeping it and the town alive. The snow-trampled sidewalks told him that.

When he opened the saloon door, he felt the raw tension press as an invisible wall against him and felt the men search him for signs of guilt. Ben Hempty had been a colorful landmark and his killing had shocked them and left them suspicious and dangerous. Most of the men were from the far reaches of the valley and had heard the news too late to join the posse.

Ed noticed the drummer who had got off the train with Bill, sitting alone on a wall bench. Ordinarily, he would have been the center of conversation, with his stories and news of the outside world. But nothing mattered tonight except a salty oldtimer and his killer.

Ed threaded his way to the rear table where Bill sat alone, and when Bill raised his eyes, Ed realized that he wasn't the only one who felt fear. Bill was between a rock and a hard place; fresh out of prison and a murder hanging over the town. Bill was plainly afraid.

He was shuffling a deck of cards and his hands were so shaky that he kept dropping them and Ed knew that Bill's nerves were as tight as new-strung barbwire. Ed took a chair beside him and signaled the bar for a drink.

"I guess you heard about Hempty?" Bill said.

"I heard," Ed answered and lowered his voice. "Shouldn't you be making fast tracks out of here?"

Bill's face turned to black stone and Ed realized that he had said a very dangerous thing.

"You want me to get my head blown off? That's what'd happen if I tried to leave," Bill snapped. "I've got some things to settle up first and then I'm leaving in broad daylight."

BILL WAS silent for a moment, then his hand slipped beneath the table and came to rest on the gun that was hidden beneath his coat. Ed eyed him steadily and left his hands on the table.

"Listen, Kid, don't go casting any ideas about that robbery," Bill's voice was the deadly snarl of a trapped animal.

"I'll say nothing," Ed answered slowly. "You know that."

"See that you don't," Bill snapped angrily.

So this is the way it ends, Ed thought regretfully as he rose from the table and walked out of the saloon. He could feel Bill's eyes prey on his back and he felt his stomach ball up into a tight dry knot.

Ed stood outside in the cold air and suddenly recalled that Bill had forgotten to ask him for the money. Or had he forgotten? Ed sat down on the bench and rolled a cigarette while he questioned this in his mind.

Presently, he saw Ellis and the posse ride in and wearily dismount, beating their arms and stamping their feet against the cold. As the men stomped into the saloon, Ed heard Andrews, the owner of the store, say, "The snow sure blotted out his trail."

Through the frosty windows, Ed watched Sheriff Ellis question Bill and Bill answer heatedly. Ellis and the posse returned to their saddles and rode away again, a bunch of grimly determined riders who disappeared into the falling white blanket. When Ed looked through the windows again, Bill was gone.

Ed walked down the street to the livery stable and discovered that Bill had saddled his horse and had slipped

away. Ed hoped that Bill had gone for good, but he knew better. No man would leave his bed roll behind unless he planned on coming back. There was no telling which way he had gone in this storm.

At dawn, he saw Bud Harley ride back into town and come into the saloon. Bud took a drink at the bar to thaw out, and listened to the men tell about the hold-up.

"Why—why, I saw Bill Leggit there yesterday afternoon," Bud said, wide-eyed. "Hempty was alive then."

"I stopped for tobacco," Bill spoke up. Ed saw him standing in the saloon's back door.

"Maybe you should have paid for it," one of the men said, and covered Bill with his six-gun.

Ed felt someone ram a gun against his spine. Helpless, he watched the men overpower Bill. Bill tried to fight back, straining wildly to get his gun and bring it into play, but they were too many against him. It took three men to hold him, and when they pulled him off the floor, Bill's face was red with fury and the cords in his neck stood out like knotted ropes.

"Shall we lock him up for the sheriff?" the barkeep asked.

"The only trouble is that the jail is warm and comfortable," one of the men said. "He don't deserve that."

Someone laughed. A cold ruthless laugh that made chills run down Ed's spine. He made a slight half-turn, wondering if he could grab the gun out of his back and pull his own. But Bill caught his eyes, and Ed stopped.

"Don't waste yourself, Kid," Bill said. "I ain't worth it."

They pulled Bill out the front door and only one man stayed behind. The man who had a gun in Ed's back. The man took a step backward, so he could watch out the window. *If I do*, Ed thought, *I'll either wind up dead or be through in this valley for good—*

But he had no trouble with the decision and swung his fist. The man dropped to the floor. Ed stepped behind the bar, picked up the sawed-off shotgun that lay on a shelf and went out the back door.

He bucked the snowdrifts that lay in sharp-edged waves in the alley.

ED REACHED the end of the alley and paused behind a horse shed. To his right he could see the lone tree and the men grouped beneath it. They parted to let someone guide a team and wagon beneath the stout limb and then they stood Bill on the edge of the tailgate. The rope was tossed over the limb and the noose dangled before his eyes.

Ed swallowed hard, stepped into the clear and fired one barrel that rattled through the dead branches. The team snorted and shied, and the men wheeled towards him, and for the moment, Ed knew he had them deadlocked.

"Better take him to jail," he said. "He deserves to have his say." Bill stared at him and shook his head.

"You're wasting your time, Kid," he said after a moment. "This pack wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Cut him down," Ed said and motioned with the barrel of the shotgun.

They studied him for a moment and Ed watched the anger heat die out inside them. They took the noose from Bill's neck and lifted him out of the wagon. Ed heard muffled hoofbeats in the snow and glanced out of the corner of his eye to see Sheriff Ellis and the posse ride up on them. They had someone wrapped in a yellow slicker and tied across a saddle.

"Forget it," Ellis said, simply. "We got the man who killed Hempty. He confessed to a lot of other unsolved crimes too—including killing Dan Freeman."

The men stood there, hardly moving, and at last one of them remembered to cut the rawhide thongs tied around Bill's wrists. They started back to town in straggled bunches and Ed saw that most of them were feeling pretty sheepish. Ellis was staring down at Bill.

"What happened, Bill, you lose your nerve?" Ellis demanded.

Bill shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bill, here, rode out to kill Freeman," Ellis looked towards Ed, "but when he got there, he found Freeman out in the timber, hurt bad. Jim's ax had flew off the handle and broke his leg. Bill took care of him

and put splints on his leg and everything."

"Freeman told me all about it, Bill," Ellis pushed his hat back with his thumb. "He wasn't as unconscious as you thought he was. He owes his life to you, Bill, and I don't think he'll soon forget it. But you two had better get on out there; Martha needs a hand. She said to bring Bill out with you, Ed."

Ellis neckreined his horse and rode off. Ed took a sidewise glance at Bill.

LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER

his arm and pointed. A cloud of dust lifted above the limitless distance and resolved itself into a body of horsemen.

"The pony soldiers," Giles shouted. Bugles rang out and the soldiers streamed past the rocky fortress. They all stood, watching as the Apaches broke and fled in singles and small groups. The unmounted horses swung around in short wild gallops and then settled down to grazing.

Bridges had no trouble rounding them up. He brought them back to the cluster of rocks as an officer finished interrogating Giles. The officer mounted. He sat there for a moment and asked, "You didn't find your man, Marshal?"

Bridges stood there, his head raised looking at Hugh Giles.

Giles returned the stare for a moment and then he pursed his lips and nodded toward Gregg. "The Indians got him, Captain." He swung up on his horse as the Army officer cantered back to his men. "Heading north now. Captain's giving me some shells and a detachment up to Kearney.

THE FORT MCKENZIE MASSACRE

He may as well not have taken any goods with him, for that winter there was no trade. The inhabitants of the fort, afraid to venture outside the stockade to secure sufficient wood for their fires, huddled inside and shivered until the long winter was over.

The fur company again tried to persuade Culbertson to return, and this time made a deal with them.

He saw the fort was located in a country traveled almost exclusively by war parties, and so went back up

"Tough guy," he grinned.

Bill grinned a little too. It was the effort of a man who had forgotten how to smile and was trying to learn all over again.

He said, "I did ride out there to kill him, Kid, and found out that all I had to do was ride off and let him freeze to death." He shrugged. "So I made a fool of myself."

Ed put a hand on Bill's shoulder and they started towards the livery stable, their boots making deep tracks in the snow... ●END

(continued from page 19)

Reckon I can make it back to God's country. I hope."

Bridges put up his hand and said, "Maybe I'll be seeing you, Hugh."

Giles smiled and shook his head. "Better not, Hardy. Not ever." He pulled up his horse suddenly. "What're you going to do with all that gold?"

Bridges looked at Juanita. He said, "I'm going to put it back in that hole, Hugh." He was silent for a moment and then added, "And concentrate on raising horses. And maybe kids."

Giles laughed and said, "Name the second boy Hugh." He touched his hat and rode away.

Ramon and Felipe stood to one side. Felipe said, speaking to Bridges, "Se hace tarde."

Ramon's usually stolid face was broken with a grin. "Yes, brother," he said, also speaking to Hardy. "It is getting late. And our father will be worried."

The two brothers turned and mounted and rode toward Armijo.

Juanita and Bridges followed more slowly. ●END

(continued from page 23)

the river and built a new one.

Culbertson had a good year, and the following May he took 1,100 packs of buffalo robes, with a large number of beaver, fox, and wolf skins, to Fort Union to meet the steamer. On the way, however, he burned Fort F. A. C., a move which Chardon took as a personal insult and never forgave.

Francois Chardon was transferred to one of the forts downriver, and in 1848 he died of scurvy and was buried at Fort Pierre. ●END

THE BIG SMASH

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

CHAPTER

1

Right In His Face

MARK SANDREY paused at the elbow turn of Bonanza City's narrow street, lighting a thin cigar although it was not his habit to smoke so early in the day. His eyes moved restlessly under the brim of his hat, searching for some definite reason for the unnatural hush that gripped the boom-camp today.

On the surface all was quiet here, too quiet. The proprietor of the O. K. Corral had been in a drunken sleep as usual, so Mark had unsaddled his own horse. The smoke of breakfast fires lingered above the rows of solidly built adobe houses. But there were no children in the tiny yards where they should be getting in their play before the day's heat began to fill the canyon. And though at this hour the morning shift should be trudging up the steep trail to the mine, not a man was in sight.

Sandrey flipped his match to the ground. He was not a man who gave much weight to hunches but a subtle feeling of danger was in him now, prickling along his nerves and tightening the muscles of his lean belly. He wanted to hurry on through the town and reach his own house, to hold Sabra in his arms and marvel once again at his luck in having such a woman to wait for him. But he stayed where he was, frowning.

Success laid heavy demands on a man but it gave full value in return. At thirty, Mark Sandrey was manager of the Golden Queen, a man whose name was respected throughout Arizona Territory. There were many who

cursed what they called his good luck; for all of them he had a friendly grin and a nod. But when he gave an order he made it stick.

Now his ears caught a low rumble of voices. He moved forward again, following the sound, and peered into the gloomy space between the print shop and the Double Eagle saloon. At the rear of the buildings, on the slope of rubble that reached up to the canyon wall, a dozen men stood in a loose group. They were miners, their massive shoulders and gnarled hands testifying to the toil that was their chosen work, their faces marked by the drunken violence of their play.

Their faces were solemn now, as they looked down at the dead man who lay amid a clutter of rusty tin cans and broken bottles. A thin, gray little man whose balding head still showed the mark of the eyeshade that he had always worn. His gaunt face was slack. The haft of a knife protruded from his side.

Mark's long mobile mouth tightened. The dead man had been the assayer at the mine. Groping for a name, Mark realized suddenly that a man got out of touch with people when he was busy with many things. They tended to become cogs in the machine that he tended, a machine that whirled faster and faster, got bigger and bigger all the time.

He started forward but stopped once again when he saw the miners fall back and uncover their heads in an awkward silence. A girl came running along the slope and dropped to her knees beside the dead man, her hands pressing to her cheeks as her eyes widened with stricken compre-

To those hardbitten miners who'd sunk their life-savings here, Mark Sandrey was the Golden Queen, and what they didn't take out of the ground they were sure to take out of his hide . . .

heasion. A spasm of grief shook her slim body.

Ben . . . Ben Pitkin. The dead man's name emerged from some recess in

Mark's mind now. Pitkin had been a widower with a daughter who'd be about twenty-three now. Mark didn't know her at all, but he did know that

AFTER TONIGHT, BONANZA CITY DOUBTED IF MARK SANDREY WOULD BE RIDING SO TALL IN THE SADDLE ANY MORE . . . POWERFUL BOOM-TOWN NOVEL

Drawing his gun, he shouted, "Pull the ribbons, Willy, this is the end of the road!"



she had some little business of her own down here in the town.

He wondered why timid old Ben Pitkin had been killed, and if there was anything that he could do to help. The girl would need money...

But before he could move forward again he felt the sudden grip of a hand on his arm, and jerked around to face the man who had come silently to his side. He saw a long, raw-boned face and a mouth that was downturned in an expression of loathing. "Get back out of their sight, bucko," the man warned. "If they see you now they'll tear you apart!"

MARK STARED, hardly comprehending the words. This hard-bitten oldster was Sam Royce, who had been with the Golden Queen since its beginning, a man upon whom Mark had always depended when the tough and dangerous jobs came along. Royce had dangled on ropes against the face of the cliff, drilling holes in rock and setting charges of dynamite. Once he had crawled into a broken stope, under a thousand tons of teetering rock, to rescue an injured miner. But he remained his own man, truculent and blunt in stating his disapproval of things he didn't like.

"Why should I hide?" Mark demanded as Royce's ungentle hand pulled him past the corner of the print shop. "Sam, what's happened here? Why isn't anybody working? Who killed—"

"It's popped right in your face, bucko. The thing you been fearin' all along, I'm thinkin'. The big smash."

Mark scowled. He knew Royce's penchant for telling things in his own backhanded way and was irritated by it now. "Say what you mean," he ordered roughly. "Stick to Ben Pitkin. He was a quiet sort with no taste for whisky, too old for women-chasing. I don't see why he would be the one to get a knife in his ribs."

"Don't you, now!" Royce's gravelly voice held a biting scorn. "How long you been back in camp?"

"Twenty minutes or so. Why? What's that got to do with—"

Royce's eyes measured Mark's six-foot length with an unhurried glance. He spat and then said, "You better

be able to prove it. Or you'll be askin' your questions of Ben himself. Maybe you will anyhow!"

Mark's hands clenched. "Dammit, Sam, don't throw riddles at me! I asked you what's happened here!"

"Edgy, are you? Your game's right out in the open now, so you can stop pretendin' an' save your hide if you can. Pitkin talked, savvy? He came down to the Double Eagle last night, yellin' that he couldn't hold it back any longer. Before he finished, every man in camp was jammed in there to listen."

"But hell, he didn't tell us a thing we didn't know already. Just showed us what fools we been, is all. Every Cousin Jack in the mine knowed that the vein thinned out months ago. But Munson kept us muckin' out the rock an' haulin' it to the mill. We figured that if he knew some magic that would get thousand-dollar gold out of ten-dollar rock it was all right with us. We kept hopin' it would last, that the vein would come in again. But he wasn't gettin' the gold, savvy? Them assay an' mill reports was lies!"

A feeling of weakness flooded through Mark Sandrey. This was too crushing a thing for a man's brain to grasp at one sweep, this sudden ending of his hopes, this crumbling of the foundation upon which he had built his life during the past five years. It all seemed crazy, illogical. The Golden Queen was too big a thing to fall. The gold couldn't be worked out. If it was, why hadn't Jake Munson brought word to Mark—or, in his absence, to Dex Armand—so that operations could be slowed down. Why had they gone on mining worthless rock?

"Sam," Mark said thickly, "you're crazy. The gold is still being shipped. Why, just last week when I was back East I saw a report—"

Royce's scarred old face leered at him. "You can't bluff it through that way, bucko. Pitkin told us how he faked the reports, get that through your cocksure young head. You've kept things goin' so you could get all you could out of the suckers, keep'n' us busy minin' an' buildin' tramways so things would look good to the Eastern gents that came out here to pour their money into it. But they

wasn't the only suckers you had in your net, was they? Every man in this camp has worked for slim wages, takin' the rest of his pay in stock that you said would make him rich some day. We're the real fools. We put our sweat in it because we had faith in Mark Sandrey!

"That's-a joke, ain't it? I seen the day when you did honest work, but things have come your way too fast an' too easy an' it's rotted your backbone. Made you a stinkin' crook!" Royce's chest swelled. "Now you or whoever's in this with you have killed old Ben to shut him up. He was my friend, savvy? But there was a time when I called you my friend too, so I owe you this much: sneak out of camp if you can, an' maybe you'll get away. Stay here an' you'll need more than Jake Munson to shield you from a hangrope!"

WITHOUT consciously willing it, Mark glanced over his shoulder. The street still was empty behind him, leading down to the livery corral and on to the expanse of the desert beyond. A man could lose himself out there in a wilderness of cactus and brush, maybe get across the Border...

He shook his head to rid himself of the shocked haze that clouded his brain. He looked up toward the mine, and its long fan-shaped tailings dumps that spilled down the cliffs. Toward the gleaming sheet-iron mill buildings and the fine houses of the company executives. Dex Armand had wanted everything to have the appearance of solidity, of permanence.

One of those houses was Mark's. Sabra would be up there, sleeping late as she always did, perhaps waking up now and stretching herself with silk-en grace.

He had to get to her somehow, and get her out of here to some place of safety before he did anything else. Then he would confront Dex Armand...

"Sam, I'm not going to run. Sam, listen to me. I didn't know—"

"No, by Judas! I've warned you, an' now I'm shut of you. This here's somethin' else I owe you—" Royce lashed out with a massive fist that jolted Mark's head to one side.

Mark went down to his knees and then bounded up, fists cocked, the

will to fight thrumming within him. But then his hands dropped. He didn't want to fight an old man. Oddly, the blow seemed to have cleared his mind, and now he could see how all this must look to Royce and the others. Suddenly he could understand their aroused hatred of him.

They too had built their lives and their hopes on the Golden Queen. They were simple men, to whom the Eastern stockholders were but a shadowy power and Dex Armand only a reminder of it. Mark Sandrey was the man they knew, the boss who had hired them. Until a few months ago he had given every order that directed their work. Then he had been "promoted," and Jake Munson had been moved up into Mark's old job. But that put Mark above Munson, still nominally in charge of things.

Mine steals had been worked before in Arizona, and honest miners hated them. This time they themselves had been robbed, and one of their friends had been killed. The manager of the mine must surely be on the "inside" of a steal like this. Mark Sandrey was the man they would blame.

He lifted his suddenly tired face. "I don't want to fight you, Sam. I'm going up the hill to protect my wife. So help me, if you try to stop me I'll kill you."

Royce spat and turned aside. "Do as you damn please, an' the devil with you. You won't get back through the canyon, I'm thinkin'."

CHAPTER

2

The Steal

MARK DID not go directly to his home, however. By the time he had climbed to the ledge on which the homes and the offices had been built his first confused reactions to all this had ebbed and he realized that Sabra was in no immediate danger. He saw that Dex Armand's fancy black carriage, with a pair of fast-looking horses in the harness, stood behind the office building, shielded from the eyes of those in the town below. He stopped and turned to stare at it, his mind shifting ponderously from one fact to another.

Dex Armand was a bachelor who

found little that was to his taste, in the way of amusement, in Bonanza City. Sabra didn't like the place either. She had been an Eastern girl whom Mark had met in Tucson, and she yearned for the outside world. Probably she had felt a little sorry for Armand; at her insistence Mark had invited Armand over for dinner several times a week.

Certainly those evenings had been pleasant enough. Armand was sleekly handsome, a good talker, his manners always those of a polished gentleman. Mark had detected a certain envy in Armand's eyes as he watched Sabra move about the room.

Armand had had the carriage sent out from the East, and had gotten into the habit of taking long twilight drives into the desert. Sometimes alone, more often with Willy Quade as driver. But there would be no pleasure jaunt today. The crash had come and Armand was getting out.

Mark's fists closed. Armand called himself the "stockholders' representative" here, but that meant little to the miners. In reality he was the boss, keeping in the background but issuing the orders that were passed along. Also he held some important office in the company that had been organized by investors who were eager to get in on any new mining venture. Mark didn't know about that end of it.

Armand must have engineered the steal. There seemed no other explanation for it, unless Jake Munson—Mark shook his head. Munson was too slow-witted for anything like that.

Silently, bitterly, Mark cursed the impatience that had made him rent a horse in Tucson and make the long night ride across the desert. He could have waited for tomorrow's stage-coach, but he had been eager to see Sabra again.

He couldn't prove the time of his arrival in Bonanza City, though. Sam Royce had seemed willing, in his backhanded way, to take Mark's word on that. The other miners would be more stubborn, hard to convince that Mark had not been here when Pitkin was killed. Mark had seen miners avenge killings before and knew that their wrath was a thing of unreasoning, uncontrollable violence.

Maybe it was for the best, however,

that he had reached camp this morning. Maybe he could stop Armand before it was too late. With a deep fury seeming to thrust him along he strode toward the office.

Two men detached themselves from the shadows on its porch and blocked his way. One had the build of a half-starved boy, and sickly tan hair that formed an eave of a sort over his collar. This was Willy Quade, who was down on the payroll as a messenger but actually served as a personal body-guard for Armand. Quade was forty, and there was a violent truculence about him that had gotten him into several scrapes down in the town. Mark recalled, suddenly, that Quade had used a knife on those occasions. But the weapon that rested in the crook of Quade's arm this morning was a sawed-off shotgun.

The other man was Jake Munson, stope boss in the mine. Munson was big, with massive stooped shoulders and thick lips that rolled back from his teeth as he said, "In a hurry as usual, are you?"

"Get out of my way, Jake," Mark said, his muscles tensing. Munson and himself had disliked each other at sight, and had clashed repeatedly.

"Givin' the orders again, eh?" Munson said. "Well, I ain't takin' 'em any more, remember?" He nodded toward Mark's house, wickedly knowing glints coming into his eyes. "Your purty little plaything's waitin' over there. Why don't you—"

Mark's fist lashed out. Munson was too slow to evade it. He lurched back against the many-windowed wall of the office, floundering to regain his balance. Willy Quade lifted the sawed-off; but Munson growled, "Keep out of it, Willy. This is somethin' I've been lookin' forward to for a long time. You can watch—" Munson lunged forward.

But a new voice said, "Munson." It was a quiet voice, yet an incisive one. The voice of Dex Armand, coming from the doorway.

Munson fell back again, grumbling. Mark tramped past him, fastening his gaze upon Armand's long, sleek, handsome face. Armand moved smilingly aside for him to enter the office.

In a single glance Mark saw that

the big safe was open and that four carpetbags were on the floor in front of it. One of the bags still was open, and it was two-thirds full of bundles of currency that had been hastily thrust into it. Armand was packing to travel.

Mark swung his gaze to the Easterner's face. His hand dropped to the stock of his holstered gun. "You're not going anywhere, Dex. You missed out on two counts. You didn't know that old Ben Pitkin, the man you had killed because he talked too much, was my friend. And you didn't count on my getting back here quite so soon, did you?"

ARMAND WAS fully as tall as Mark but slighter in build. His sideburns were neatly trimmed and his clothing was the costly sort. If his composure was ruffled now he made a good job of hiding it. He smiled calmly, saying, "Your getting back is the best thing that could have happened."

"You'll change your mind about that," Mark drew his gun. "I think I savvy what you've been doing here. You pulled me out of the mine and kept me busy with things like building the tramway and making trips to buy machinery. I thought that was to keep me from tangling with your man Munson, but the real reason was that you wanted to prevent me from finding out that the mine was no good any more."

"You wanted to keep things going, keep up the appearance of a successful mine so the flow of sucker money wouldn't stop coming. There was more to be had from the suckers' pockets than there was in the ground, wasn't there? You faked assay and mill reports, but it's all caught up with you now."

"Has it?" Armand interposed quietly. "A deal of this sort is all a matter of timing, and you've turned up at exactly the right minute, Mark. I wasn't quite ready to pull out, but Pitkin forced my hand." He shrugged. "So be it. You're my front man here. You're the manager—to those simple fools down below, you are the mine. You're a dead man, Mark. And while they're busy with you—"

"The devil with that," Mark said

hoarsely. He was thinking that he had been a thorough fool, and he was angered by it. The history of every gold mine in Arizona had been rich ore at the surface, tapering to smaller and smaller values as the shaft went down. Mark had ignored that in his blind faith in the Queen. And he'd been busy with his little chores and errands, happy to return to Sabra when they were finished.

Armand wasn't bothering to deny anything now. He had often talked of the riches of the East, saying it was easier to get money by the scratch of a pen on a stock certificate than by blasting stubborn rock from the ground. And he had kept up a bustling activity here. A dollar of someone else's money spent in such doings would bring in a thousand in new investments. Mark looked again at the carpetbags and wondered how much they contained. A million? Two?

Whatever the amount, it was all here. Armand had distrusted frontier banks, scornfully comparing their plank counters and dirt floors to the elegant solidity of such places back in Boston. The real reason had been that he had been playing a dangerous game, one in which he might have to flee with his winnings at any moment. Mark didn't know how Armand had kept the Eastern stockholders at bay and didn't much care. Probably he had faked the accounts as he had faked the assay and mill reports.

"Dex," Mark said, "I'm going to kill you. For Ben Pitkin and for all the others down there. I don't give a hang about your Eastern suckers but those miners did more than shove their money into a gamble. They put their sweat into it. They built homes here. Damn you—" He lifted the gun.

Armand's face took on a strained look. But his long, graceful hands remained at his sides. He said, "Quick, Jake!"

MARK WHIPPED around, knowing in that instant that he had been a fool once again. Stunned by the enormity of the steal and by his own furious reaction to it, he had clean forgotten about Munson and Quade. He should have—

Before he was fully turned a sudden grip was thrown upon him from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. Jake Munson lunged into his range of vision, clamping a hand on the gun and wrenching it free of Mark's hand. Munson's lips rolled back and then his fists were hammering, jolting Mark and flooding his body with pain.

Mark struggled to free himself from Willy Quade, who held him. But though Quade was slight in build his arms had the strength of steel bands. Mark flung himself first to one side and then to the other, like an animal in a trap, dragging Quade with him but failing to break the grip. Munson followed every move, grunting with effort as he drove in the punishing blows. As he had said, he'd waited a long time for this. And he was having it all his own way.

The beating seemed to go on for an eternity. Mark lost track of everything but those pounding fists and Munson's exultant, cruelly smiling face. The pain of the blows was a thing that built up and up until it was unbearable. There was a smell of blood, and Mark knew that it was his own.

He heard a splintering crash as a chair was smashed by his own struggles. A distant voice said, "Dammit, get him out of here so I can empty the safe. Finish it outside, but don't kill him, mind you. Just fix him so he can't get away from the mob. I see they're bunching down there now, and they'll be up here in a few minutes. We want them to have something to occupy them while we slip away..."

Mark felt the cold touch of the outside air in his lungs and for a moment it revived him a little. He tried to fight back but it was no use. Quade clung to him like a leech, holding him helpless while Munson slashed at him with systematic, punishing blows and kicks.

Armand's voice reached his ringing ears again. "All right, that's enough. Get the carriage turned around and help me with these bags. Willy, see to it that my woman is ready..."

Mark was released, and he crumpled to the ground, hardly alive at all.

A man knew only one instinct at a time like this. The will to save himself if he could. Mark found that he was

dragging himself along the ground, away from the torture of Munson's fists.

After a time he came to his feet, blinded by blood and agony, lurching along without knowing where he was going. Armand had talked about a woman. His woman. What the devil had he meant by that?

The smooth surface of a doorknob came into Mark's hand. He stumbled forward and then he was in a house. His own house. Some instinct must have brought him here, some yearning of a beaten man for the haven of his own home. Another doorway swam into his vision, tilting crazily from side to side, and beyond it was a bedroom. A room in which Rosa, the fat Mexican housekeeper, was hastily packing things into a bag while Sabra paced impatiently about.

Sabra. She was a tall and beautiful woman, with glossy black hair. A man was lucky to have a wife like her. Mark's dulled mind knew a moment of anxiety when he realized that he would have to tell her that everything had gone smash. Sabra wouldn't like that. She wanted the things that success bought, demanded them as the proper background for her loveliness.

He wanted to move toward her but couldn't. The bag, partly filled with silks and jewelry, got into his vision again and he stared at it fixedly. "You're...leaving?" he croaked.

"Of course. With Dex. And you can't stop me."

Dex. Dex Armand. Mark understood everything now, with a clarity that cut like the edge of a knife. He had been sent away from here on a dozen errands, but it hadn't been because of the animosity between himself and Munson after all. He heard his voice say, "How long has this been going on?"

She gave him a tiny, mocking smile that was edged with distaste for the blood that was on him, for his weakened, beaten appearance. "Longer than you think. I'm sick of this place, sick of the heat and the wind, sick of skimping along on what you make. Get out of my way, Mark."

Once more he tried to move and again he failed. Distantly he heard the shouts of the miners down in the town. They'd be coming up here

soon, coming for him, but it didn't matter now. There were blows that a man could stand and some that he couldn't. A wave of crushing tiredness pushed at him and he saw the floor tilt and rush up toward him. He knew that he was falling, but felt no shock when he struck the floor. There was only darkness and quiet.

CHAPTER

3

Law Of The Mob

THE VOICES that came to Mark's ears were tiny sounds at first, seeming to reach him from a great distance. His head was lifted gently and he felt something damp and cool stroke down the sides of his face. A glass of water touched his swollen lips, and he drank a little of it, forcing his eyes open as he did so.

Rosa was looking down at him with an expression of pity in her eyes. Pity for him, and not entirely on account of the beating he'd had. Illogically, that angered him. He stirred and sat up.

A voice said, "Keep still, mister. You're in bad shape."

That wasn't Rosa's broken English. Mark frowned and twisted around, and saw the girl who was rising to her feet at his side. She had the glass of water in one hand and a damp, blood-smeared rag in the other. Ben Pitkin's daughter—what was she doing here? "Thanks," Mark mumbled thickly. "But I've got to get out—"

"Not right now." The girl put down the glass and the rag and shoved against his shoulder, unbalancing him as he tried to rise. She took something shiny from the pocket of her skirt. It was a little pearl-handled revolver, of the sort that ladies carried on this rough frontier. "I came up here to kill you, mister. But I—" Color crept under the tanned skin of her cheeks. "Rosa has been telling me things. Now you can tell me some more. Start with Dex Armand and what he's had to do with the running of the mine."

Mark looked at her, wanting to laugh at her ignorance of the whole structure of sham that had been erected here. But he himself had been equally ignorant of it until a short

while ago. If only he hadn't been so stupidly blind...

He wondered how he could tell it all so this Pitkin girl would believe him. Her eyes seemed enormous, shadowed by her grief and yet watching Mark narrowly. She wasn't the sort of woman Sabra was, by far. She wasn't soft and silky-looking. She wore a man's shirt that had been washed and patched a lot, and her skirt was made of the sturdy material that was used for men's work pants. The stance of her slim body said that she had faced life squarely in this desert boomtown, letting nothing scare her much, self-reliant as any man.

It made Mark feel an odd kinship with her, and he started telling her all about Armand and the big steal. About the Eastern money that flowed in more swiftly than gold could ever have been dug from the ground. "I should have guessed what he was up to," he finished. "But I didn't."

She frowned, her solemn brown eyes searching his face. "I don't think I believe you, mister. You managed the whole shebang, didn't you? Dad said that Munson threatened to kill him unless he faked the assay reports. And Munson got his orders from you, everybody knows that."

"No, he didn't." Mark climbed to his feet, thinking that Armand had used him very shrewdly from the beginning. Mark had worked in a dozen mines, shoulder to shoulder with many of the men whose shouts now made an ugly roar down in Bonanza City. He had been plucked from their midst and set up as "front man." In spite of his recent trips outside he was the mine, to them, just as Armand had said. As stope boss he had hired all of them. Promoted to manager he was even more firmly in control of things, as far as the world could see.

He tried once more to tell the girl exactly how it had been. How Dex Armand, seemingly a rich Eastern playboy whose only interests were in fast horses and the elegant society of Tucson, had pulled the wires. How Munson had refused to take Mark's orders, and how Armand had shifted things around, seemingly to avoid a clash between the two men but actually to get Mark out of the mine.

"You're either a big liar or a big

darn fool," she said. She drew a deep breath. "I'm going to take a chance on you, mister. We'll catch Armand and make him talk. If he says the right thing, okay. If not—" She wagged the pistol.

MARK SMILED faintly thinking that what she proposed to do was a large order. The sounds of the mob were closer now...

The girl turned to Rosa saying swiftly, "Go out to the porch and look, *madrecita*. See what Armand's doing—they were loading stuff in his carriage when I came up the hill." As the Mexican woman moved heavily toward the door crossing herself, the girl spat, "*Pronto!*" Rosa fled.

"Can you walk mister?" the girl asked anxiously. "We've got to get you out of here. There's a back door, isn't there?"

"There is. But I'm not going to—"

"Don't keep on being a fool! I'll talk to the miners, stop them for awhile somehow. There's a ledge up above these houses. You can work along it and get past the town. I'll meet you on the desert with a couple of horses. If Armand gets out of here we'll—"

Rosa came back into the room, then. "The carriage ees go down the road, *senorita*. But many *hombres* came up the trail—" Her eyes rolled wildly in fear.

The girl shoved at Mark. "Get going, mister."

He grinned back at her, crookedly and without humor. Mark Sandrey had come down to this, to accepting the help of women. But he had to do it. The mines wouldn't listen to him, not until he could show them proof to back up his words. And he had seen men plead for their lives until the rope choked off their breath.

And now, with his strength returning somewhat, he felt a violently rising hatred for Dex Armand, a desire to get his hands on the man and feel Armand's bones crunch and break, to see the smug confidence pulled from his face by despair. He knew that the road which had been built from the canyon floor to the office led downward in switchbacks at some distance from the foot-trail the miners would be climbing. The carriage team

was fast; Armand would get away while the mob was busy with Mark.

He turned to the back door, pausing only to say, "Thanks, Miss Pitkin. Might I know your first name?"

Her chin tilted with angry impatience. "Of all the darn-fool things to worry about! It's Ann, if that makes any difference. Get out. I'll be waiting for you at the lower end of the canyon if you make it that far." She put her hands on her slim hips, fingers touching the pearl stock of the pistol which she had returned to her pocket. "And don't get any ideas about slipping past me, savvy?"

He gave her a long, final look and stumbled outside.

Shielded from the eyes of the angry miners by the company house that had been his home, Mark toiled up the steepening slope. He was panting and weak when he reached the ledge, and a spell of dizziness forced him to lean against the cliff wall for a minute. His body was a mass of pain. Munson's fists and boots had done that to him, but it had been Armand's doing, really. Armand hired others to do the rough work for him. Armand sat back, smiling and secure, using other people's lives in whatever way suited his purposes. Mark's hatred gathered itself into a hard spear-point of fury that was aimed toward Dex Armand.

HE LOOKED down toward the road that zig-zagged from the office and was lost to view in the town below. A blanket of dust lay over the road, moving slowly along with the first of the morning wind that would be howling up the canyon in another hour. Armand had gotten clear. Mark's eyes caught a glimpse of the carriage as it rounded the bend of the street.

He cursed the miners for letting Armand go. But they were some distance from the road, though not too far for them see that Mark had not been in the carriage. The Easterner had seemed unimportant to them, a smiling lightweight. Mark was the man who had talked them into taking most of their pay in stock, the man who had talked to them of the riches they would have some day. He was the man they wanted now.

The trail that led upward to Mark's house was jammed with them, a line of men that moved with the intent purpose of a crawling snake. A few of them carried rifles, others gripped pick-handles.

He saw the Pitkin girl go down to meet them, saw them cluster about her on a knoll. By their angry gestures he knew that her words were making no impression on them. Suddenly she was seized, and her gun was taken from her, and she was shoved roughly aside. She tripped over something and fell down the slope a few yards, coming to a halt in a crumpled huddle while the miners moved on up the trail.

They moved faster now. They thought that Mark Sandrey was in his house, hiding behind a woman.

He shoved himself angrily away from the cliff wall, brushing back his coat before he remembered that his holster now was empty.

A sudden shout floated up from below. The miners were pointing, gestulating. His movement on the ledge had caught someone's eye. A rifle bullet spanged against the cliff, showering him with rock fragments.

He dropped to his knees so that the brink of the ledge would give him some protection from the guns below. As he did so he saw Ann Pitkin scramble to her feet and go running down into the town, and he thought distantly, *Thanks, Ann—you tried, anyway.*

The thing that mattered now was self-preservation. It was a long climb up to this ledge but once the miners reached it they would be able to shoot along it and Mark Sandrey would be done. He lurched forward, following the ledge and clambering past boulders that had lodged on it, forcing himself to hurry. Bullets howled around him but he paid no attention to them. One thought filled his mind: *Get clear of them—it's the only way to get at Armand.*

Suddenly he realized that the gunfire had ceased. He had been running for a long time and now he was on the bulge of the canyon wall above the center of town, though not yet out of rifle range. He looked back curiously.

The miners had almost reached the

other end of the ledge but all of them had halted. They were looking down into the town.

Then Mark saw the thing that had riveted their attention. From a point near the lower end of Bonanza City rose an ominous plume of smoke, laced through with rising flames. Fire! The distant shouts of the miners echoed from the cliffs, and then the men turned and moved like racing ants, back down toward their homes.

They all knew the danger of fire, here in a land where water was scarce and wood was made tinder-dry by the desert air. Adobe wouldn't burn but roofs and furnishings would. If the fire was not controlled by the time the morning wind funneled up the canyon the blaze would sweep through the town in a matter of minutes.

Swaying, fighting dizziness again, Mark looked down. The fire was in a small building that was located at the edge of the wash, some distance from any others. And now a white cloud of steam rose up with the smoke. The women of the camp had discovered the fire and were fighting it, and they had found enough water to do some good. Mark staggered on.

WHEN HE reached the floor of the canyon at its lower end, a mile from Bonanza City, he was moving faster. His stamina was returning, throwing off the effects of the beating. He pushed through brush and reached the stage road, and found the tracks of Armand's carriage there. He scanned them with wolfish eagerness and turned to follow them.

He had gone only a short distance when a sound of hoofbeats, behind him, pulled him around. Ann Pitkin rode toward him, sitting astride on a livery-corral nag and leading another saddled mount.

"Here you are," she said. "Get on him, mister. We've got a job to do, remember?"

Mark stepped into the saddle. But a new thought struck him and he said, "You crazy girl. You started that fire, didn't you?"

"I had to pull them back from that ledge somehow. It was my own place that I burned, and it's far enough from the other shacks to keep them

from catching, I think. The miners couldn't see just where the fire was from where they were, though. There's a couple thousand gallons of water in the cistern I built in the wash, so if they don't get the fire put before the wind comes up it's their own fault."

Mark had known that some residents of the town had built rock catch-basins in the wash, to retain some of the water that raced down it during the infrequent rains. But he hadn't known that any of them were so large. "Why such a big cistern?" he asked.

"It takes a lot of water to wash the muck out of miners' clothes." She looked at him solemnly. "You didn't know I ran a laundry, did you? Dad's pay didn't go very far, and I didn't want to be a burden on him."

Mark winced. He'd had a hand in that matter of pay. A little money, a lot of stock that he had thought would be valuable some day. "I'm sorry about Ben," he said. "He and I were friendly. He—"

"Yes. He invited you down to the house a couple of times, but you were too busy to come. That was a long time ago."

He looked at her, trying to decide whether she still suspected him of having a hand in old Ben's death.

"There's something else you should know now, mister," she said. "Sam Royce didn't go up the hill with the rest of them. He—he tried to stop Armand in the street, I guess. One of the women told me that he grabbed the bridles of that fancy team, and then Willy Quade got down and—" She shuddered. "He used a knife, Mark. Sam's lying back there now..." She broke off, sobbing openly.

Mark asked her, as gently as he could, if Royce was dead. She nodded. Mark's jaw hardened. Sam Royce had been a good man, and it was the good ones who died because of the schemes of one like Dex Armand. "That's another score against Armand," he said. "Do you feel up to riding on, now?"

She wiped tears from her face, nodding once more. Mark lifted his reins, then looked toward her again. "I didn't thank you for getting me out

of camp. Seems like I'm always thanking you for something—"

"Don't bother! I haven't made up my mind about you yet. Just ride, mister—out in front where I can watch you!"

CHAPTER

4

The Money Trap

THE HORSES that Ann had brought were typical of the sort kept by liverymen for rental. Within a few miles they were blowing, unable to hold the pace that Mark had hoped to maintain.

He swore under his breath. Armand's matched team was fast, with plenty of bottom; at this rate Mark and the girl wouldn't be able to overtake the carriage before it reached Tucson. And once he reached the town, Armand would be able to buy whatever help he needed.

Mark slanted a glance over his shoulder and saw that the girl was riding as if dazed, her eyes never leaving his back. A strange journey of vengeance, he thought. An unarmed man and a grief-stricken girl, trailing a thief who had made his steal and would do everything in his power to keep his winnings.

Lifting his eyes, Mark looked at the uprearing, naked rock walls of the Bonanza Mountains. Undoubtedly, the miners would be following him soon. But they were unused to the saddle and, having no horses of their own, would have to rely on livery mounts; he had no particular worry on their account.

His thinking swung to the families of those men, and now he knew another reason for this ride he was making. With the mine shut down they would be in a fix, isolated by a hundred miles of desert, without wagons to haul their possessions away, without savings to finance a search for other jobs. Mark Sandrey had helped rob them, in a way. Now he would have to see that they got at least some of the money they had earned.

He tried to think ahead, tried to put himself in Armand's place and decide what the man would be most likely to do. Armand's main concern would be to get himself and his loot

to some place of safety. Surely he must know that the Eastern stockholders would prod the law into action when they found out that they had been fleeced. Probably some of them were men of influence. No place in the country would be safe for Armand then.

Mexico—that was the answer. It would be a haven for Armand, and it was only fifty miles away. The carriage might turn off anywhere and strike out across the desert.

The tracks held unwaveringly to the road, however. The sun climbed higher in a brassy sky and flooded the desert with its molten heat. The horses were shambling along at a walk now. Ann Pitkin's face was streaked by dust, marked by fatigue.

At the top of Coyote Ridge they met the stagecoach. Yes, its driver said, he had met a fancy black carriage several hours ago. At the rate it had been going it should be almost to Tucson by now. Mark nodded his thanks and rode on, wishing that there were some habitation along this road, some place where he could obtain fresh mounts. But there was none.

They were far out on the desert, with the sunset painting the sky behind them and Tucson still many miles ahead, when Mark's horse went lame. He could find nothing wrong; the shoe wasn't loose and there was no rock jammed in the frog of the hoof. The animal had a weak leg and it had simply given out. There was but one remedy for that. Rest.

Mark looked at Ann's mount and instantly dismissed the idea of riding double. Her horse wouldn't last ten miles with the extra burden.

"We'll have to stop awhile," she said. "Or maybe we could strike out afoot..."

She was as anxious to go on as Mark was. But he shook his head. It would be dark soon, and night was the time when the rattlesnakes crawled. A horse could smell them, but a man or a girl, trudging afoot through the night, was as likely to step on them as not. The risk was too great. Mark led the horses into the shade of a big mesquite tree, loosened the cinches and took off the bridles. He sat down, looking at the ground between his

boots. Ann perched on a rock nearby, her large, solemn brown eyes watching him.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring along some grub," she said.

Mark shrugged.

"You can think of just one thing," she said after a time. "What you're going to do to Dex Armand."

"Yes. I'm going to kill him if I can."

An odd light stirred in her eyes. "It's because of Sabra, isn't it?"

Mark was startled when he realized that it wasn't because of Sabra. Strange, but he hadn't been thinking about her at all. She had cut the bond between them; he could look at the fact coldly, and that made him wonder if he had been a fool there too. It was as if he never had really known Sabra until now.

But a man had to look ahead, not back. His own career was finished unless he cleared himself by stopping Armand. Word of a steal like this got around fast among mining men. Unless he could prove that he'd had no part in it Mark would be blacklisted at every diggings in Arizona.

A girl, he thought, wouldn't understand matters of that sort. And so he said simply, "No, it's not on account of Sabra. A man doesn't like to be stepped on, that's all."

He let it go at that, hardly noticing the quiet, searching look that she gave him.

WHEN THEY reached Tucson it was nearly morning. Ann's horse had given out completely in Redgate Pass, and Mark's mount had gone lame again. They had left the horses up there and had trudged together down the road, listening for the warning whirr of snakes and looking out toward the lights of the town.

When they reached the outskirts they moved along streets that were dark and silent. In the center of town there were lights and drunken shouting, but not here. Mark turned down a narrow street that was scarcely a hundred yards long.

Ann stumbled over something and nearly fell. Quickly, Mark put his arm around her slim waist to steady her. She was too done-in to make any

objection, but she asked, "Mark, where are you taking me?"

"You're going to get some food and a chance to rest in a place where you'll be safe. From here on this is a man's job." He knocked on a door.

After a time it was opened by a grey-haired Mexican woman who held a lamp high as she peered with sleepy suspicion into the night. "*Quien es?*" she demanded. "Who— Oh, *Senor Mark!* Come, it is long time since you 'ave stay at our house. I fix for you the—"

"The girl is hungry and tired, *Senora Garros,*" Mark said, interrupting her.

The woman put her arm about Ann's shoulders. "*Por verdad!* She will stay. And you too, *Senor Mark.* The weariness, it is in your face. And you've been hurt. You mus' let me—"

He shook his head. "I'll be back later. Don't let anybody know she's here." He turned to leave.

Ann's hand touched his arm. "You think you're putting something over. Well, you're not. I'm just so darn tired I can't go another step. But I've made up my mind about you, mister." Taking the tiny pistol from the pocket of her skirt she handed it to him. "You'll need this. But Mark, do be careful..."

Caution was the thing farthest from his mind right now. As he stalked through the town the tiredness of his body was crowded aside by the hatred that thrummed through him at the thought of getting near to Armand. Armand would be here, somewhere; he was a man who liked comforts and luxuries, and he would be certain to stop here overnight after the long trip from Bonanza City. Mark's job was to find him, quickly.

Fingering the little gun that he had slipped into the pocket of his coat, he wondered about the sudden change in Ann Pitkin's attitude toward him. He put it down to the fact that she had reached the limit of her endurance. The long grind through the desert heat, added to the shock of her father's death had been too much for her. And so she had been forced to give up her notion of following Mark and watching his every move. Certainly she had no more reason to trust him than before.

It was good to know that she would be in a safe place, though. It would have hampered him to have to worry about her while he went after Armand. He moved more swiftly now, paying no attention to the shadowy figures of men who passed him on the street.

The place to seek information would be Charlie Lavender's gambling parlor. Lavender was a businessman with many interests, including a big livery stable; but at this hour the gambling place might still be open.

It was upstairs in a massive adobe building. It was not a place that ordinary people frequented, nor were they wanted here. Lavender had built himself a tight little world of thick carpets and shaded lamps, of discreet quiet and high-stake games. Wealthy mine owners and cattlemen could bring their ladies here for an evening's entertainment, secure from the noisy riff-raff of the saloons. It was a place that Dex Armand had always liked.

AT THIS hour the poker tables and the faro layout were covered with cloths. Attendants were cleaning up the place, polishing spittoons, wiping the mahogany of the bar and washing glassware. Mark tramped on through to Lavender's office and entered it without knocking.

Lavender still was at his desk. He was a big, fat man with heavy jowls and brushy white hair. His smile revealed a gold tooth and brought to life a disarming dimple in one cheek.

"Well, Mark, howdy. We don't see much of you since you got married." Lavender's pale blue eyes narrowed. "You've been in a fight—trouble out at the Queen?"

"I'm looking for Dex Armand. Has he been here tonight?"

Lavender shrugged. "People come and go. I can't keep track—"

Mark's hand clamped on the velvet lapels of the gambler's coat. "Look, Charlie. I haven't got time to listen to you stall. Dex wouldn't pass up a chance to give your games a whirl. Was he here?"

Lavender's eyelids lowered. "I try to be friendly with everybody, you know that, Mark. I keep out of people's quarrels. I have to, or they'd—"

A crazy anger welled up within Mark. "You're so damn friendly that you're just a fat jellyfish!" he began angrily. But then his eyes narrowed; Lavender was holding back for some better reason than the ones he'd mentioned. And in that instant Mark thought he knew what it was, and he laughed. "Sabra was with him, that's why you're trying to clam up. She always wanted to put on fine clothes and show herself off in this place of yours." He jerked the lapels. "They were here, Charlie."

A faint smirk came to the gambler's mouth. "All right, I guess I'm not telling you anything you don't know already. They were here about midnight, but—" He brushed Mark's hand away, leaning forward in his steerhide-covered chair, his eyes glinting. "They made me curious, Mark. Armand had a lot of money and he wanted it changed into large-denomination bills, right away. I didn't have enough of them so he wanted me to use my influence and get the banker out of bed." The gambler's pale eyes quested over Mark's face. "What's afoot out there at the Queen, Mark? Armand was nervous—"

"I've got to find him," Mark said, ignoring Lavender's question. *Big bills*, he was thinking. *Fewer of them that way—easier to carry*. "Where did they go?" he demanded.

Lavender settled back in his chair, his face a smiling mask once more. "Now Mark, how would I know anything about that?"

Mark turned away, knowing that he would learn nothing more here. He went out through the "parlors" and down the stairs. At the street level he paused, trying to decide what to do next. Tucson had a dozen hotels. Armand might be in any of them, or in some private home.

A man came along the street at a hitching run, paused to look back over his shoulder and then darted into the blackness of the doorway where Mark stood. They bumped together and the man gave a low exclamation of fear and apology, trying to get past. Mark blocked his way.

This hombre was Trem Vincent, a thin-faced and colorless little man of thirty-odd who had run Lavender's faro layout until he'd gotten into some

sordid fight in the Mexican quarter and had been badly slashed with a knife. His right arm dangled uselessly now, and one side of his face was dead. He no longer fitted into the sleekly elegant atmosphere of the gambling rooms and he couldn't do any physical work, so he was kept busy with other little chores for Lavender. It was whispered around Tucson that some of them were pretty unsavory.

On a sudden impulse Mark pinned the man against the wall. "You're on edge, Trem. You've been out on a little errand for Charlie, haven't you? My hunch says that he sent you to follow Armand and see where he went. Charlie likes money pretty well—"

"No!" Vincent cried. "Nothing like that, Mark. I—I just went out for cigars—"

"At this time of night?" Mark whipped out the gun that Ann had given him and jabbed it against Vincent's twisting body. "Don't make me laugh, Trem. Where's Armand?"

Vincent looked wildly down at the gun; then he pleaded, "Don't make me tell you. Charlie'd kill me if I—"

"I'll kill you if you don't talk! I haven't got time to tell you how things have stacked up, but it's my life or yours, savvy? I'm not going to fool around counting for you, Trem. I'll trigger this—"

"No, wait! You—you're getting a dirty deal and you've got a right to know about it, I guess. That wife of yours is with Armand. I've always liked you, Mark. Charlie does too, I think. We—" The gun jabbed again. Vincent's eyes rolled wildly in fear and he went on, "They're in a house down at the end of Ramirez Street. The one with the fancy iron gratings on the windows."

Vincent drew a deep breath. "A big hombre was on guard but he didn't bother to look twice at me. I eased around to the back of the house and heard Armand and the woman talking. She was giving him hell, Mark. Called him a coward for stalling around, and said they should be across the Border by now. He kept saying they had to be careful, that the money had to be changed into bank drafts or something else that they could hide under their clothes so the Mex bandits

wouldn't guess they had it. Even the authorities down there, he said, might rob them if they smelled that money."

Mark's sudden laughter made a sound of crazy mirth against the quiet of the street. Hell, this was funny! Armand had schemed to get that money and now he was beginning to realize how much of a hazard it was to his own safety.

That much money was many things to many men. Bait for the bandits and for Charlie Lavender, who might risk his reputation, such as it was, for a big killing. A trap for Dex Armand, holding him with jaws of fear and restricting his movements. And thus it was a silent ally—the only one he had—for Mark Sandrey.

CHAPTER

5

End Of The Road

MARK SANDREY moved along the streets questing for the one he sought. The effects of his beating and of the long ride were piling up again. His head throbbed wickedly with waves of pain. Which way was Ramirez Street? He couldn't remember. Turning the corner at the Butterfield Stage office, he stopped and looked around.

A feeling of danger stabbed through him and he whirled, just as a man who must have been very close behind him dodged away into the darkness. Willy Quade. Mark was fully alert now, his hand bringing the tiny pistol from his pocket. Quade had been staked out by the cautious Armand on the chance that Mark might reach town tonight, and he had been easing up to Mark in hope of using that knife of his. Now, no doubt, he would hurry to Armand with word of Mark's arrival here.

Following Quade might be a way of locating Armand's house, but it wouldn't give Mark what he needed. He had to get there first in order to gain the advantage of surprise. He hurried on, swearing with mounting impatience as he made one wrong turn after another. Finally he was forced to awaken a teamster who was sleeping in his wagon, to ask directions. When at last he strode down Ramirez Street Mark knew that he had lost too much valuable time. Armand was warned by now.

The house was silent, seemingly deserted. No guard lurked at the gate in the patio wall. The living rooms were upstairs, reached by an outside stairway, and the door up there stood partly open. Mark climbed, reached a landing and entered a room that was furnished in the sort of elegance that Armand would want even in temporary quarters.

Moonlight reached through the windows, and a curtain stirred in the breeze. Somewhere out in the town a dog barked, rousing a dozen canine voices in response. But in here there was only silence and seeming desertion.

A board creaked, although Mark had not moved. He spun around just as a voice said, "Howdy, sucker!"

A big, hulking figure had lunged out of the deep shadow in the corner of the room. The hammer of the little pistol clicked back under Mark's thumb. But before he could squeeze trigger he was seized from behind and his gun arm was wrenched down and back...

There were two of them, exactly as before. "Don't use your blade on him yet, Willy," Jake Munson's voice grunted as his fists hammered Mark's body. "I aim to have some fun with him first."

Munson and Quade, again. Mark felt a surge of helpless wrath; oddly, it was directed more at himself than at them. Only a fool stepped into the same trap twice.

Munson's face swam toward him through a shaft of moonlight, thick lips rolled back in an expression of glee. "Armand's lit out, but we ain't quite that nervous. He told us to see that you don't bother him again, an' this time we'll do the chore proper."

A RED HAZE of agony writhed before Mark's eyes. He was being driven back, back, still pinioned by Quade's steel-spring arms and held helpless, unable to defend himself against the massive fists that slashed and hammered and reduced his flesh to quivering pulp. He couldn't last through much more of this...

With a final effort he doubled up, rolling Quade over his back and dumping the little man against Munson. Quade yelled something, his

voice shrill with alarm. His grip loosened.

Mark wrenched himself free. Ann's pistol was a tiny, glittering thing there in the moonlight, ten feet away from him. He had lost it sometime during the beating. Evading Munson's rush he darted to it, scooped it up and fired, directly into Munson's body.

The shot made a spiteful little report. The bullet seemed to jolt Munson hardly at all. He was swinging around to face Mark once again, and now he rushed like a charging bear.

Mark fired again and again, not counting the shots. Munson slowed, halted, looked down at himself as if dazed by the discovery that there was something that could hurt him. Suddenly his legs gave way. The room shook with the impact when his body struck the floor.

Quade was on his feet again, coming at Mark in a crouching run. A knife gleamed in his hand. Mark flicked the pistol around and squeezed the trigger, but heard only a click. The little weapon was empty, and he had no shells of its caliber in his gun-belt. He flung it aside.

Quade's expression of frantic determination changed to something else. Taking his time now, he straightened a little as he closed in, an exultant smile pulling at his face.

Mark felt a touch of the icy fear that any man must feel when he sees a knife reaching for him. In that moment he thought he knew what made Willy Quade tick. Quade was something that stronger men might sneer at, but give him a knife and he could make them fear him.

He slashed at Mark with the blade. Mark dodged, lashed out with a booted foot that caught Quade's forearm. There was a crunch of breaking bone and then Quade squalled with pain and crouched again, grabbing his arm as the knife fell from his hand.

"You should have used a gun on me, Willy," Mark panted. "You should have used it before, when you sneaked up on me in town—or was Armand so cautious that he didn't want you to attract attention by gunfire?" Not waiting for an answer, he rushed.

Quade scrambled away, his boots slipping on the floor, striking a chair

and overturning it. But he had a lizardlike quickness; he got past Mark somehow and reached the doorway.

Mark caught him on the outside landing and they locked together, Mark's fists driving the hombre's slight body back against the railing and pinning him there. Quade twisted, writhed, but couldn't get free.

There was a sharp sound of breaking wood. Suddenly, all resistance to Mark's blows was gone. Quade was dropping away from him, falling...

The railing had given way. Mark caught a splintered end of it to steady himself and saw Quade strike the ground, bounce up again like a released spring, and run out through the gate in the patio wall.

Mark turned to lunge down the stairway, knowing with a cold clarity that he had to catch Quade and force him to tell where Armand had gone. But his feet tangled with something. He realized that it was a portion of the broken railing, which had fallen across the steps. But now he was falling, floundering roughly downward until a final jolt that seemed to strike his head stopped him completely. He tried to get up, but his strength was flowing swiftly away. *Must have hit that little wall at the bottom of the stairs, he thought. A fool thing to do, falling like a clumsy...*

HANDS WERE tugging at him. A voice was saying excitedly, "Senor Mark! Senor Mark!"

He struggled up. The seamy-faced old Mexican who bent over him was Manuel Garros, at whose home Mark had often stayed. It was full daylight now; Mark had lost hours of time. "Got to have a horse," he mumbled thickly. "Got to—"

"Senor, they 'ave come to my house and take the *senorita* away! She resist, but it is no good. Maria and I, we can do nothing. They leave for you a paper—" Manuel dug into his pocket. The paper read:

Sandrey:

The Pitkin girl is my insurance. If I reach the Border she will be left there unharmed. If anyone interferes with me— Well, Willy is with me and you can figure it

out for yourself. He has another knife now.

There was no signature, and none was needed. Mark knew that this was the doing of a man who was thoroughly frightened, and thus was even more dangerous than a calmer person might be. He turned to Manuel, asking, "Did you see what road they took out of town?"

"But no, *senor*. They 'ave hurt Maria, an' w'en I 'ave help her I think only of finding you. I search for hours—*Senor*, many miners 'ave come into town. Maybe they help you—"

Mark shook his head ruefully. He saw that Manuel was unarmed; no chance of getting a weapon there. He hurried out to the street.

The sun was rising over the Rincon peaks to the east. Mark needed a gun and a fast horse now. Charlie Lavender's livery stable was the largest in town; Mark reached it in a matter of minutes.

A scowling hostler greeted him with "What the hell do you want?"

"A saddlehorse, bucko. The fastest one you've got."

The hostler spat and laughed mirthlessly. "Now that there's a good one! A bunch of crazy miners hit us this mornin', shoved me an' the boys to one side an' helped themselves to every saddler we got." He spat again. "Then they lit out of here."

A COLD hand of fear squeezed Mark's heart. Not fear for himself, this time. He was thinking about Ann Pitkin now. Quade must have been watching for Mark to come into town last night, and had seen him take Ann to the Garros house. Now Quade was with her, riding in Armand's carriage while the angry miners took up the chase. Quade and his knife.

"You've got some other horses here," Mark said swiftly. "The ones you keep for Charlie and his friends to ride. I've seen them being led out of the shed out back—the miners didn't find them did they?"

"No they didn't. But I've had all the shovin' around I—"

"What's the trouble boys?" a calm voice asked.

Turning, Mark saw that Charlie Lavender had entered the barn with

his man Vincent at his heels. Quickly, Mark told him what had happened, omitting his talk with Vincent in response to the mute appeal in the cripple's eyes. "You're going to let me have one of your pet horses now, Charlie," he finished.

"Am I?" The gold tooth gleamed in a smile but there were thoughtful glints in Lavender's eyes. "Armand pulled off some sort of swindle at the mine, didn't he? He's anybody's game now."

"Not your game, Charlie. The money will have to be divided between the stockholders and the miners who put their sweat into the deal. You could have jumped him last night, but you've been sitting behind a desk too long to move fast. It's nice to think about having all that money but it would get you in trouble, Charlie. Word of a grab like that gets around among miners and you well know it. You've kept your games fairly honest, so far. You've got a good thing and you want to hang onto it and be friendly with everybody. You wouldn't have a friend in Arizona if you pulled off what you've got in mind."

Lavender sighed. "I always did say you had a lot of savvy, Mark." He turned to the hostler. "Vincent just told me that some miners roughed you and took the horses. Which way did they go?"

"They took the river road, boss," the hostler said glumly.

"The damn fools. That road's been washed out for a week and Armand knew it—he inquired about it at my place. He'd take the old road, the one through the Needles. Get a horse for Mark here, Kelly. And one for Vincent—he can ride all right, and he knows the way."

While the mounts were being saddled Mark stepped into the tiny office of the stable, found a sixgun and slipped it into his holster. When he mounted his horse he grinned at Lavender. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Good luck." A chuckle shook the gambler's belly and he added, "You seem to be making an honest man of me, but maybe Armand will make a dead one of you. Watch out for that knife of Quade's."

The needles were a row of spirelike

peaks, south and west of the town. Vincent, it turned out knew more than just the road itself; he knew shortcuts that saved hours by cutting across the big loops that the road made in avoiding the river bottoms. And he knew a trail that climbed steeply past the switchbacks that the road made on the slope to the peaks.

The carriage was climbing the switchbacks now. Mark and his companion had passed it unseen because of brush, long ago. It moved slowly upward, since a hard pull would sap their strength.

Mark climbed to a rock ledge, working around one of the spires to get into a position just above the road. Vincent remained behind, smiling in apology for his own helplessness.

Mark scanned the desert for signs of the miners whose presence, if discovered by Armand, might mean death for Ann Pitkin. But they were not yet in sight. Probably they had discovered that the river road was washed out and had turned back to town. They would find out about this road but that would take time.

THE CARRIAGE rounded the last switchback and toiled upward, muscles rippling under the glistening black hides of the horses. Quade was driving and Ann was in the seat beside him, her wrists and ankles bound with rope. Armand and Sabra were in the back, and Sabra was wearing a wide-brimmed, filmy hat that was something new. At their feet were the four carpetbags along with other luggage. Armand had been too frightened to wait to get his money changed.

When the carriage was almost below him he rose to his feet on the ledge, drawing his borrowed sixgun. "Pull the ribbons, Willy!" he shouted. "Dex, this is the end of the road!"

Quade's boyish face jerked up. Instantly he grabbed Ann and pulled her to him as a shield. In the rear of the carriage Armand jumped to his feet, lifting a double-barreled derringer and firing it.

Both shots missed, although Mark felt the hot passage of a bullet past his cheek. Armand fumbled hastily for more shells. Sabra cowered away from him so that she wouldn't be struck by a bullet aimed at him. Mark

tried to line his sixgun on Armand, but was hampered by the danger of striking one or the other of the girls, as well as by the swaying carriage.

Quade hadn't obeyed Mark's order. Still gripping Ann, he was sending the team into a lunging run.

Without really thinking about it, Mark crouched like an animal, timed his leap and plunged from the ledge.

He landed on the rear of the carriage, almost missing it altogether but getting a grip on the back of the seat and scrambling over it. Armand twisted around to face him as he triggered the derringer.

Mark felt the jolt of the bullet and knew that he was hit. But his sixgun had thundered just an instant after Armand's shot. Now Armand was stiffening, life draining from his face as he twisted and pitched out of the speeding carriage.

Willy Quade had let go of the lines now. He came around, snarling, a knife in his hand.

"Drop it Willy," Mark warned. "You can't beat a gun with a sticker."

Quade's face twitched. Then suddenly it was sly, knowing. He dropped the knife. "All right," he said, lifting his hands. "You got me mister."

"Stop the rig," Mark ordered, glancing aside toward Sabra and meeting the hate-filled look that she gave him. "Like I told Armand this is the end of it. You won't get to play the rich lady, Sabra. Willy will have to answer for Ben Pitkin and Sam—"

Ann's scream cut through his words. Quade's right hand had darted into his coat and now it emerged with a gun.

Mark fired, but the lurching of the carriage made it a bad shot. Quade was only nicked. But at that moment Ann's booted feet kicked strongly against him, spilling him from the rig. He struck some jagged rocks, rolled over and over and lay still.

WHEN MARK got the team stopped he cut the ropes which had bound Ann's wrists and ankles. "Girl, you'll do to take along. Are you all right?"

Her head bobbed, wide brown eyes searching over him anxiously. "Mis-
(continued on page 97)

ONE WAS TOUGH

THERE ARE two of the Hobbs boys and they learn to shoot before they are weaned, gun-speed being about the only thing old Ben Hobbs can leave his sons when he dies.

Both of the boys can shoot like men by the time they are hitchrail high and it looks as if they are both bound to be like Old Ben all over again. But then Ben is killed in a

Walt Hobbs never told it around that he was a brother of gunfast Chuck Hobbs. So it was too bad that Chuck had to go and run off at the mouth . . .

Two more hard blows to the chin and Hoot's legs fold.



by
**LARRY
POWELL**

saloon brawl—he is standing right next to me when he gets it—and the boys go their separate ways.

And Chuck Hobbs does take the same trail his father rode. Before long he has picked up a rep as a gun-hand. In this country a fast gun can get you a name almost as quick as it can get you a tombstone.

But Walt Hobbs vanishes like tracks in the wind and I do not know what happens to him until I take this job tending bar in Big Horse. I find that Walt runs a small ranch near the town. Known as a quiet man, Walt hardly ever speaks except for a howdy, tends to his own business—and never wears a gun. He has a pretty young wife with a laugh like a spring bubbling.

A man with no gun is somewhat unusual in these parts, but Walt Hobbs makes no trouble and wants no trouble. Walt does not tell it around that he is a brother to gunfast Chuck Hobbs, so I keep it beneath my vest.

I figure I can see what has happened to the Hobbs boys because of their pop's death—Chuck has taken to the hot lead trail to get revenge on the world, and Walt has given up guns because he realized his father's Colt-speed never got him anything but dirt over his face.

This is the situation when Buck Daniels buys out the Circle D and begins to press the small ranchers in the valley. Several of them are run out. It looks bad for the rest, particularly Walt Hobbs who refuses to be shoved but refuses also to fight fire with fire.

Then Chuck shows up in town. I recognize him as soon as he bats open the saloon door and swaggers to the bar. He has the same sharp chin, wide mouth and sandy hair as his brother, Walt. He wears two guns in a knowing manner and walks as if he has just thrown a saddle on the world.

Chuck is not long letting everybody knows that he is Walt's brother. He orders a man-sized drink, then turns to speak to everybody in general.

"My name is Chuck Hobbs," he says loudly. "I hear my brother, Walt, has been having some trouble with range-hogs. I am here to give him a hand."

THERE ARE a few Circle D hands at the bar but they are not looking for a tangle with a fellow like Chuck Hobbs. They gradually desert the bar to spread the word of Chuck's arrival.

I make myself known to Chuck and after we have talked old times, I ask him, "Did Walt send for you?"

Chuck grins. "No. Walt doesn't even know I'm in town. But the word is getting around that Walt's about to be trampled into the ground because he won't fight." He swallows his drink clean. "I can't let the good name of Hobbs be bandied around, so I rode in to help—whether Walt likes it or not."

I get a good look at Chuck's eyes while he is talking and I can see a big difference between him and Walt. The eyes of both are blue. But Walt's are smooth and quiet, while Chuck's eyes have a small fire burning in them like the bright flame of a candle when it has just about burned to the end of the tallow.

Shortly after, Walt walks into the saloon. The word of Chuck's arrival has already passed to him. He shakes Chuck's hand and says, "I hear you have come to help me out at the ranch."

When Chuck says Walt has heard right, Walt says evenly, "I'll be glad to have you. Think you can dig some fence postholes?"

"I ain't much of a hand for digging postholes," grins Chuck. "But I may be digging some holes about six feet deep if Circle D hands don't stick to their own range."

"You're my brother, Chuck, and I'm glad to see you," Walt replies softly. "But I don't need you to do my fighting for me."

"The way I hear it, there won't be any fighting done 'if somebody doesn't do it for you," replies Chuck.

Walt's hand is gripping the edge of the bar and I can see his knuckles whiten. But he merely says, "I'll be riding to the ranch in about an hour. We'll ride out together."

Well, it looks like the Circle D will not have to worry about either of the Hobbs boys because anyone can see they butt heads right off. But Chuck sticks to the ranch the next few days and there is no hint of trouble until

pretty Mrs. Hobbs comes in to do some shopping.

Sitting in the buckboard seat and holding the reins is Chuck Hobbs. There is something about the way Chuck helps Mrs. Hobbs down from the seat and escorts her to the general store which indicates he is being more than polite.

Ken Norris, who owns the store, says to me later, "I ain't never seen a man look at his brother's wife that way before."

So Chuck Hobbs tags all over town with his pretty young sister-in-law, carrying her supplies and helping her over the mud left in the street by the recent rains.

MRS. HOBBS has finished her buying and is on her way back to the wagon, laughing at some sally by Chuck, when Hoot Murphy rides by. Hoot is Circle D foreman and it is a known fact he does not care for small ranchers. It is never clear whether Hoot does it on purpose or not but he rides close to the board sidewalk and his horse splashed mud on Mrs. Hobbs' skirt.

Hoot rides on and hitches up before the saloon. He has hardly reached the walk when he is met by a boiling Chuck Hobbs. Chuck knocks Hoot against the wall of the saloon and goes after him.

Hoot is no baby to be wet-nursed himself, although he is no gunhand. He bounces back from the wall and swings it out with Chuck. The two men fight back and forth on the walk until Chuck breaks away from Hoot's grip and straightens him with a hard right. Two more hard blows to the chin and Hoot's legs fold. Chuck lifts Hoot to his feet, pushes him to the edge of the walk and boots him face first into the muddy street.

A bunch of men have gathered by this time, most of them Circle D hands. When they see their foreman plow nose-first into the mud they make for Chuck. But Chuck backs up, his hands over his guns. This halts the cowhands. They would like to take Chuck apart, but they do not wish to take him on with sixguns.

Chuck backs away, picks up his hat from the walk and helps Mrs. Hobbs into the wagon. They pull away. Mrs.

Hobbs is sitting very close to Chuck, as if she is scared.

The word gets around town that Mrs. Hobbs is falling for Chuck and that it will not be long before the Hobbs boys have a showdown. I ponder the situation and believe I can understand Mrs. Hobbs' feelings.

Walt and Chuck are as different as water and sand. Walt is bound to show up bad in comparison with Chuck. At least to a young woman like Mrs. Hobbs, who does not yet know it takes rawhide to be Walt's kind of man.

I have my own ideas about how a showdown between the Hobbs boys will come out. But most of the people in town are sure that Chuck will wind up by taking his brother's wife and maybe his life to boot. Buck Daniels, owner of the Circle D, is so sure of it that he makes plans to get rid of Chuck when Chuck has obliged him by getting rid of Walt.

ONE AFTERNOON three bearded men ride into town and make for the saloon. They are looking for Chuck Hobbs. As soon as they find out he is not in town, they settle at a rear table to wait.

I do not know the men's names but I know their breed. They are gunmen. Although I hear nobody mention it, it is plain that they have been hired by Daniels to take care of Chuck Hobbs. The leader of the trio has a scar down his right cheek. He calls the other two Mike and Shorty.

Mike, Shorty and Scarface are sitting at the rear table when Bill Bridgers enters the saloon. As soon as they hear me call his name, they settle back to their bottle. Bill motions me outside.

"Looks like it's happened," says Bill. "I was riding past the Hobbs spread when I saw them having it out. Chuck had his guns hanging on a corral post and they were going at it with their fists.

"Mrs. Hobbs was standing outside the corral, crying. Seems Walt caught Chuck trying to kiss her and ordered Chuck off the ranch."

"Who won?" I ask.

Bill grins and points. "Who do you think?"

I turn to see Chuck riding slowly

toward the barbershop. I can see from where I stand that his face is swollen and red, white and blue all over.

Chuck swings down and enters the barbershop, more than likely looking for something to help his face. I think of the three men inside waiting for Chuck to show up.

"Listen, Bill," I say, "hop on your horse and get out of Walt's ranch. Tell him three Circle D gunnies are in town, wanting Chuck's scalp."

"How come?" Bill frowns. "After Walt just had a fight with his brother?"

"I just think he'd like to know," I say. Then I hurry across the street to stall Chuck until Walt can get here.

But the barber has already told Chuck about the gunnies. Chuck addresses me from beneath a warm towel, "Tell them gunnies I'll be in the street just as soon as I get through here. If I'm fixing to die, I want to die clean-shaven."

I shake my head but I do as I am told. The gunhand called Shorty is all for going over and shooting Chuck while he is in the barber chair. But Scarface dissuades them. He has heard of Chuck Hobbs and he wants the name of having gunned Chuck down in a fair fight.

Chuck finally appears in the barbershop door. The three gunnies leave without ever having paid for their bottle of whisky. But I am so excited I do not remember this until later.

Walt pounds up as Chuck is striding across the street toward the trio. He quits the saddle at a run and falls in beside Chuck. Walt is wearing a gun at his side.

The gunnies have not expected two men and they do not wait for any parley. Scarface yells and makes for his gun. Chuck leaps back from Walt, his own hands flashing down.

But there is only one shot. Scarface has not completed his draw when his knees give way and he falls to his face. The other gunnies stand stock still. They are looking into three gunbarrels.

Shortly is the first to move and he moves toward his horse. Mike is right after him.

As the pair hightail from town, they pass a buckboard. Mrs. Hobbs is at the reins and she drives as if the devil is riding behind.

Mrs. Hobbs scrambles from the buckboard and runs toward the Hobbs brothers. Both stand waiting. The brothers and everyone watching wonders which will be her choice. I close my eyes and make a wish. I wish that Mrs. Hobbs will make the right choice.

When I open my eyes, I see Mrs. Hobbs clinging to her husband and crying. She is telling him she knows he is no gunman and she doesn't want him to be one. She tells him that she realizes the kind of courage it takes to face these men and that he did it to save his brother's life. She also says some other things, including how much she loves her husband, but I do not keep track of them.

I am watching Chuck's face. There is great pain on it and it is not because of his bruises. "Well, I don't guess I'm needed around here," he says finally and turns to his horse. Mrs. Hobbs is still hugging her husband as Chuck rides away.

Well, that's it. Walt Hobbs has no more trouble with the Circle D, because Buck Daniels evidently decides if hired gunmen cannot take care of Hobbs he may as well give up. And first thing you know they are getting along like neighbors and once again Walt wears no gun.

This is all right with Mrs. Hobbs, because she loves her husband and understands that there are different brands of courage. She knows now that Chuck's brand of courage is only a kind of revolt but Walt's is the kind that makes a world where men can live together in peace.

But what Mrs. Hobbs does not know is that on that afternoon when Scarface folded and fell, he fell with Walt's bullet in his heart, for Walt's gun was out and bucking before Chuck ever cleared leather. ●END



THE MAN FROM EVERYWHERE

by PHILIP MORGAN

There was one man holding the horses.



He had a gun, why didn't he cut down on the bank robbers, the town accused Dave. And Dave wondered about that himself . . .

DAVE HANLON had drifted all over the West. From the time when he was sixteen and ran away from home and a brutal, domineering father, he'd been foot-loose, always eager to keep on the move.

There were plenty of stops along his backtrail, at a horse ranch in Arizona where he learned to gentle the wild ones off the range, at cattle spreads in Nebraska, Montana, Utah and Texas. So now, at twenty-five, he was a tall, rangy man with a perpetually reserved expression—a thor-

oughly competent hand and no stranger to trouble.

He still loved to hear the howl of the coyotes on the high desert at night as he sat smoking a quirley by his campfire, but a new restlessness filled him and it puzzled him and he drifted from state to state and outfit to outfit looking for the answer. He was still searching when he rode into the Ute Basin.

The town of Three Forks was drowsily resting under a hot summer sun when he rode down the single street. He left his big buckskin

gelding at the livery barn and walked along to the Palace Saloon. The place was empty, except for a bartender, who served him a whiskey and returned to his stool and his week-old copy of a Cheyenne paper.

Dave worried the glass around with the tips of his long, blunt fingers, thinking. *Last night he'd slept in the pines with their fragrant scent in his nostrils. The sky was glittering with stars and he should have been contented, but he hadn't been. It had taken him a long time to go to sleep and then he slept poorly, rising long before dawn to push on dissatisfied.*

He drank the whiskey and wheeled from the bar, knowing that the answer certainly didn't lie here. As he came onto the porch, he saw the frozen tableau in front of the bank across the street and a couple of doors down. One man stood holding horses, his gun out. His gaze swept the street nervously and he kept saying, "Hurry up, hurry up," in a thin voice.

Dave recognized it as a hold-up and stepped to the scant protection of one of the slender columns that supported the veranda roof. Just then the other two outlaws ran from the bank. There was a scurry and dust boiled up as they tried to mount with the bulging sacks of loot in their hands.

They finally got aboard and whipped around for the run out of town just as a teller with a shotgun burst from the bank. One of the outlaws, a heavily built man with a black beard, spun in the saddle and killed the teller with one shot. Then the trio raced from town.

Immediately afterwards, people spilled out into the street from every building. There was an excited shouting. A big, florid-faced man waddled down the street and pushed his way in to the dead teller. There was a star on this one's vest. Presently a young, pretty woman ran up and fell to her knees beside the dead teller, pulling his head into her lap and silently crying.

All of this got into Dave Hanlon and he wished he'd taken a hand in the proceedings when he had the chance. His hard-learned instinct to mind his own business had caused a

man to die here. He left the porch and crossed the street to the assembled group of townsmen.

DAVE ELBOWED his way to the red-faced sheriff. "I saw it all, Sheriff," he said. "I can give you descriptions of the men."

"What the devil were you doing all the time?" the lawman asked truculently. "You pack a gun."

"It looked like no one was going to get hurt and I wasn't going to stick my neck out over a few dollars. This man ran out so fast I had no chance to cover him." He saw the dead man's wife looking at him with a plain dislike in her eyes and didn't blame her. He said very softly, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

A thin, reedy man broke in, "Hadn't we better get after 'em, Al?"

"There's no sense in rushin' off half-cocked," the sheriff said, and Dave detected a note of uncertainty in his voice and gave him a closer inspection.

The lawman was too heavy to do much riding and his blue-veined nose showed that he drank too much. There was weakness in his face and Dave recognized the type. He was an easygoing man with a good deal of political savvy and very little ability for the job.

"Get your guns and horses and meet me at my office in thirty minutes," the sheriff said. "You," he pointed at Dave, "come along and give me those descriptions."

"All right," Dave said. He looked again at the teller's widow. She was about his own age. There was no beauty in her face, but there was a quiet strength that could pass for beauty. She sat there in the dust with her man, her future dead. She looked up and saw Dave staring at her and he quickly lowered his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I had no call to feel you did anything wrong. There wasn't any reason for you to take a chance."

He tried to put himself in a better light with her, wondering why he bothered even as he did it. "I really didn't see your husband in time, ma'am. There was no one on the street and it looked like they could

ride out without anyone being hurt. He ran out too quick."

She merely nodded, having forgotten him, and rose from the street, brushing the dust from her clothes. She turned to the thin man who had suggested pursuit to the sheriff and said, "Pete, will you see that he's taken care of? I have to get home; I left the baby alone."

Those words somehow really hit Dave. He didn't know how much bank tellers made, but he guessed that it wasn't much; so how would she and the child live? He walked slowly along after the lawman, worrying about that.

Inside his office, Sheriff Al Mieserman introduced himself and then listened while Dave described the outlaws. When he had finished, Mieserman grimaced.

"That would be Barney Eberly. He was the one with the beard. The young one holding the horses was Barney's young brother, Ernie. The average size one with the blond hair is Stinger Leonard. They're poison, all three of them. Stinger wears two guns and brags he's killed five men with each gun. That ain't so, but he's a tough nut.

"The Eberly boys used to be ranchers up to a year or so ago. But they was always fightin' and one day Barney killed a man in a fight over a woman. The man was the woman's husband. Barney left town two jumps ahead of a good horse-hair rope. I don't like this none at all."

"Who was the teller he shot here?"

"Jim Deane and that was his wife, Sally, you was talkin' to. Rough on her, what with the baby and all. I don't suppose Jim had anything saved up."

The door opened then and the thin man named Pete came in. His last name turned out to be Everts and he ran the hardware store and undertaking parlor. There were four other men seated on their horses outside the office, all of them heavily armed.

"Well, Al, we're ready to ride," Everts said. "Let's get going."

MIESERMAN hesitated long enough for Everts to realize that the sheriff was uncertain. "I don't know, Pete. How we gonna track

'em? I ain't no hand at trackin' and Bennie's down at Benson servin' a summons. He won't be back before tomorrow."

Everts threw his hands in the air in a gesture of hopelessness. "That's just great. They rob our bank in broad daylight, kill a man right on Main without a shot being fired back at 'em and now you don't know whether we should go after them or not. Snap out of it, Al. This is the sort of thing you're paid for."

"But we need a tracker," Mieserman said stubbornly.

"I'm a fair tracker," Dave said quietly. "I'll ride along."

Everts turned towards him, his shrewd black eyes narrowed. He gave Dave a close appraisal and evidently liked what he saw. He nodded briefly. "All right, Hanlon, we can use you. Come on, Al."

He turned out of the office, a small, efficient man who hated inefficiency in others. His contempt for Mieserman was thinly concealed.

They left town in a close-packed bunch. Besides Dave, Everts, and the sheriff, there were four young men who worked at various jobs around town. Everyone else was too old, too young, or too infirm to make the ride. None of them in the posse had ever used a gun against a man before and Dave had definite misgivings about what would happen when they caught up with the Eberlys and Stinger Leonard. It put a responsibility on him he wouldn't have had with competent manhunters.

But he felt that he owed at least this much to Sally Deane. If he could track down her husband's killer, it might help settle some of his debt to her. So thinking, he studied the tracks of the outlaws' horses with unusual care. Then he set off on the plain trail, taking the lead, with the other six men strung out behind him.

The tracking went fast at first. Here in the Basin the ground was soft and open and gave him no trouble. That evening though, they camped in the first foothills of the mountains and Dave knew that the trailing from here on would be gradually tougher.

They ate a cold supper and settled down on the ground. Pete Everts was

lying on one side of Dave and Mieserman on the other. The four younger men stuck together further down the slope, out of earshot. Mieserman turned and groaned as his saddle-stiff muscles protested. He wasn't used to a rough ride and now lay completely exhausted and badly in need of a drink. He was already discouraged.

"It looks like a long chase to me," he said gloomily. "And if we do catch 'em, it'll be a toss-up whether we come out on top. I don't like it. We should've waited until Bennie got back. He's a good deputy. While we were waitin', we could have got some riders from the ranches and had a real posse."

"Bennie ain't a whole tougher than you, Al," Pete Everts said coolly. "Besides, if we'd waited until morning, they'd have been long gone. If you're scared of the job, get your horse and ride on back to Big Nell's place." Mieserman rolled heavily up on an elbow and Dave thought he was going to use some pretty rough words on the smaller man. But when he spoke, his tone was more injured than angry.

"By Judas, Pete, you gotta stop ridin' me. What's the rest of them boys gonna think? Anyhow, I just drop into Nell's to get a little rest. I don't patronize the house. She's a friend of mine."

"Sure, sure," Everts said. He spoke to Dave then. "Where you from, Hanlon?"

"Everywhere," Dave said and let it go at that.

"Your record clean?"

"Yes."

"If you're tired of roamin', I might be able to use you. I like your style. I bought a piece of land out in the Shortgrass Hills south of town and I want to stock it with pure-bred beef. I need a man to run the place, because I have to spend most of my time in town. Besides, I don't know anything about cows. You interested? The pay would be good."

"Thanks, I'll think on it," Dave said seriously.

He wondered at himself. Before, along his back trail, there had been offers of good jobs. He had always refused them, because he wanted to

drift. Nowhere had he ever wanted to settle down.

Now the urge to ride on seemed to be gone, or at least lying dormant. He suddenly knew that if everything went right on this chase and if Everts still wanted him when they got back, he would take the job. He lay flat on his back, looking up at the black velvet of the sky sprinkled with a billion tiny pearls, and felt at peace with the world.

Sleep began to close in on him, but as he drifted off, he saw Sally Deane's still face, sensing again the character and strength in her. He wished suddenly that he had met her before she married Jim Deane. Then, paradoxically, he wished that he had drawn his gun and cut down young Ernie Eberly, thereby preserving Jim Deane for his wife. He went to sleep and dreamed of Sally Deane all night. In the dreams, she was smiling at him.

DAVE ROUSED the posse before dawn and when light trickled into the world, they were in the saddle. The trail was tougher to follow today, as Dave had guessed, because the ground was rocky and took few impressions. Dave noted that they weren't gaining on the outlaws, but they weren't losing ground either.

It was his opinion that the three outlaws were not in much of a hurry. They undoubtedly knew Al Mieserman and were judging him when they thought of pursuit. It was Dave's belief that the outlaws expected a token chase and then a return of the posse to Three Forks empty handed. He was counting on them believing that.

The outlaws' trail led straight for the high country. On that second day they lost it in a creek and spent two hours finding it again. The trail now led along the slope of the mountains, showing no inclination to go up and cross over. At sundown that night, Dave thought they were close enough for a try at the outlaws. He halted the party and they ate supper and then hunkered around him as he talked.

"We've been after them long enough to get an idea of what they're doing," he said. "They plan on stayin' this side of the mountains, probably holin' up for awhile until they plan their next raid. We're close on their

trail, maybe five miles behind, and I don't think they've spotted us, because they're loafin' along. Now some of you boys know this country and I want you to figure out where they might camp tonight. Then we'll close in." He looked up at the four young men in the posse. They had probably ridden up here hunting and they would know it well enough.

"There's a couple of places they might hit for," Jeb Anderson said. He was a tall, serious young man who worked as a clerk in the general store and was reading the law. "When I was up here last fall, I spent the night at an old XL line camp about six miles or so from here. Then there's the Muleskin Meadows about the same distance only more north and higher."

"Which one you figure they'd use?"

"I wouldn't know," Anderson said. "There's good water and grass both places. There's no cabin on the Meadows, but otherwise it's a perfect spot for a camp."

"Are there two ways out of both places?"

Anderson thought about that for awhile. "There's an easy way out from the line camp anyway you go. Not so easy to get out of the Meadows, especially at night."

"Then my guess is the cabin. I figure Eberly and Leonard are too smart to get caught in a trap they can't get out of. What do you think, Sheriff?" Dave knew that Mieserman was angry at being ignored on the chase and he wanted to soothe the lawman's ruffled feelings.

Mieserman thought for a minute and said, "I'll go for the XL."

"How about the rest of you?" Dave asked. They all agreed on the cabin. "We'll have a try then," Dave said. "Now this could get a little rough. I hope we can sneak up and surround the place and then nail 'em down when they come out at dawn. Be ready to fight. Don't shoot until you have a target and be sure it's not one of your own men. If you have to shoot, shoot to kill. I guess that about covers it. Jeb, will you lead us in?"

starting small avalanches of shale, and struggled up the far side only to hit another incline. When the ground was level, they were under pines with low-hanging branches that slapped their faces and left ragged scratches. All of them cursed bitterly, but they went on and at one o'clock of a cold morning, Jeb Anderson stopped them and said that they were about a mile from the line camp. All of the men of the posse were looking to Dave for leadership, but he hated to make Mieserman mad.

"Maybe we better go in on foot, Sheriff," Dave suggested.

The sheriff realized that Dave was trying to hand back the authority, but Mieserman dodged it. He was worn out by the hard ride and he was scared to the very core of his being. This was something he hadn't figured on when he took office.

"You seem to know this business, Hanlon, so you better run the show," Mieserman said, thereby losing forever any respect the others might have had for him.

"That's right, Dave, get on with it," Everts said. "We'll do whatever you say, but we want those men and we want them bad."

"So do I," Dave said, relieved that Mieserman was not taking charge. The man was a fool and this was no place for him to be in command. "We'll walk in close, to the edge of the timber, and just settle down and wait for daylight. When they come out, I'll call to them to surrender. If they make a fight of it, cut them down."

"We shouldn't give 'em any chance like that," Mieserman said. He wasn't answered, the others' disregard of his opinion clearly expressed in that silence. Without further talk, Dave led them away, with Jeb Anderson beside him as guide.

They came up on the clearing and Dave saw the black shape of the cabin in the center of the open space. He heard a horse nicker and nudged Jeb triumphantly. They had filled their flush; the outlaws were here. Dave moved his men up to the very edge of the timber, able to see very little in the clearing because of the blackness of the night. The cabin

IT WAS rough going in the dark. They slid down sharp inclines,

showed as just a darker shape against a black background.

He whispered his orders. Everts and Mieserman would move around and cover the cabin from the rear. Dave and the others would separate and cover the front and sides. He told them to get started and settled on the ground, trying to skylight objects in the clearing. He felt fine. They had the outlaws on the hip now. When they came out of the cabin at daylight, they wouldn't have a chance. They would be looking right down the posse's rifle barrels.

But right then it fell apart. Mieserman was a hundred yards to Dave's right, moving through the timber, when he fell full length over a down sapling. He made a tremendous racket and then sat up and cursed in a loud voice. He couldn't have done worse if he had yelled a warning to the outlaws. Immediately a gun opened up on the sheriff from the clearing and Ernie Eberly's shrill voice was yelling.

"Come on, it's the posse! Let's get out of here!"

Dave came to his knees, drawing his gun. "Charge the cabin!" he shouted and jumped to his feet to rush forward, firing twice at the bright orange splash of Ernie's shot.

Other guns were firing and Dave heard Ernie scream and then he was up in front of the cabin. He had meant to hit the wall down a ways from the door, but now it opened right in front of him and two men charged into him. He grabbed the man in the lead and from his size knew that it was Barney Eberly. They went down with Dave underneath and the breath was knocked out of him.

He struggled with the outlaw, fighting a sickness in his stomach. Eberly had a strong grip on Dave's gun arm. Dave caught the outlaw's arm in a quick grab and they rolled on the ground, locked together, stalemated. Dave heard a vicious volley of firing further out in the clearing and judged that it would be Leonard and the other men of the posse.

BARNEY EBERLY was slowly forcing his arm downward, the tremendous strength in the man too much for Dave. In another second, he

would be able to fire and hit Dave. Dave was still underneath the outlaw and he jerked his knee into Eberly's crotch with savage force. Eberly yelled hoarsely and relaxed.

Dave rolled clear, came to his knees and fired point blank at the white blur of Eberly's face. He climbed unsteadily to his feet and stood there several minutes reaching for breath that would not come. When he finally could breathe again, he shouted to the men of the posse.

"Barney's dead over here. Where are you?" They came straggling in. Leonard had run into Jeb Anderson and Eddie Travis had died without firing a shot. Ernie had fallen in that first burst of firing and was also dead. Dave stepped into the cabin and found a lamp and lit it. When the others came in, the only one missing was Mieserman. They trooped out to where he had last been heard and found him lying dead from one of Ernie's shots. The sheriff had never drawn his gun.

It was evening of the next day when the posse rode into Three Forks. They dropped off the recovered money at the bank and then split up, dead-beat all of them. Pete Everts and Dave took Al Mieserman's body to the back of Pete's shop and laid it out on a table. They had to answer a lot of questions by curious townsmen, but finally Everts told everyone to get out, that he was tired. When they were alone, he thrust his hands deep in his pockets and turned on Dave.

"My offer's still open. I'll pay you a hundred and fifty a month."

"That's too much money, Pete."

Everts considered that for a moment and then said, "No, I'll work it out of you."

"I'll take the job on one condition. If I can work into a partnership with you on the place."

"That can be arranged," Everts said. He was silent for a minute and then said musingly, "He just wasn't big enough for the job. Man should remember that. Always catch up with you sooner or later."

Dave knew that Everts was thinking of the sheriff. He nodded his agreement and left to find a room. He registered at the hotel and was about to climb the stairs to his room when

he remembered something. He inquired the location of the Deanes' house from the night clerk and left the hotel.

Dave came up the flower-lined walk to the unpainted, modest little house, feeling excitement and anticipation surge through him. Sally Deane had not been entirely out of his thoughts since the first moment he had seen her. He knocked and heard her light footsteps hurrying to answer the door.

When she opened the door and saw who it was, she hesitated a long moment. But then an ingrained courtesy made her say, "Won't you come in."

Dave went inside and sat stiffly on the edge of a chair. She seated herself across from him and waited for him to state his business. He saw that she was curious about what had brought him here.

"We caught up with the outlaws, Mrs. Deane. They fought and we had to kill them."

"I'm sorry for them," she said simply. "I heard it from a neighbor. They had to be stopped; you did the town a favor, Mr. Hanlon."

He was surprised that she had taken the trouble to remember his name. There was something he wanted to say to her and he did not quite know how. He gave up finally and rose. He started for the door and then turned.

"I have a job here, ma'am, a good

job. I won't need all the money I'll be gettin' and I want you to have part of it every month, for you and the baby until things get straightened around."

She was stunned by the offer. She got up and came up to him and looked into his face, trying to read something there. But the offer was honestly made and she sensed it. "Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"I feel responsible. I could have stopped them that day and I didn't. I'd feel better if you'd take the money."

"We need it badly," she said honestly. "Thank you, Mr. Hanlon."

"There's one other thing. I was wonderin' about the job. Are the people friendly? Do you think a man could be happy here?"

He saw her eyes widen with surprise and he saw that she understood what he was trying to say. She said, very soberly, "I think you would like it, Dave."

He nodded his head at her and went out the door in a hurry, not wanting to push his luck any further. She had used his first name, which maybe meant something. She was grieving now, but she was too much of a woman to grieve forever. Somewhere in the future there might be a place for him. He walked slowly back to the hotel, feeling none of the old restlessness. When he came through the lobby, the night clerk noticed that he was smiling. ●END

FRONTIER FACSIMILE

by BESS RITTER

ALTHOUGH few western fans are aware of the fact, the famous Colt Single Action Frontier Revolver that protected the life of the man who went West in the riproaring 1880s, was manufactured without interruption for nearly 70 years. It was discontinued only prior to World War II. Now another manufacturer is offering a better model with modern steels and new calibers that's hard to detect from the old-time originals which so vividly recall the stories, legends and personalities who made it so famous, since the only changes in the design are concealed in the screw threads and

firing pin assembly. Otherwise it's a bona fide, perfect reproduction, including the same barrel lengths, lines and weights. According to expert handgunners, collectors and gun fanciers, as far as the heavy handguns are concerned, it's the finest designed, and you can own one for yourself, writing your own ticket too in regard to the special custom finish that you want to have on it. The selection includes nickel, chrome, silver, gold, both plate and inlay, and engravings that range from the simplest scrolls to the fullest presentation. ●END

THEY WERE HORSES, NOT INDIANS

by HARRY HARRISON KROLL

Them Pawnee ponies had trusted me, that was why they let me steal 'em. And now the Colonel wanted to shoot 'em!

WHAT I'M fixing to tell you now about them there hosses' kisses is the four gospels, and I don't want to hear any word more about the blame business. I got a bellyful of it, and the next feller that brings up the subject I aim to gut him.

To start on, it was like this. We was in a little mudsill fort about fifty mile below Council Bluffs, ridin' herd on some Injuns that remind-ed you of a little nest of yallar jack-ets. I think they was an off-branch of the Pawnees, but no differ. They was mean as all get-out. A shirt-tail-ful of 'em would pounce down on a settler's cabin or a homesteader's outfit, butcher and sculp the man and take the wimmin and chillun off for slaves, and all we ones there at the fort could find was a pile of ashes and maybe some bones.

Colonel Summerfield he knowed about as much about Injun warfare as—well, put it like this—I knowed about wimmin; and he puffed and blowed and cussed and sent us soldiers out to scour the countryside and bury the corpses. I was the one that put the idea in his bonehead, though he got the credit for it.

"Steal thar hosses," them's my words. "A Injun on foot is just about as good a brave as a three-legged buffalo in a steamboat race."

So after I done the brainwork, the Colonel put his forces in motion and we made a raid on the Injun village and swiped all their hossflesh. I'll say this for 'em. They kept good brutes. Little, wiry, fast, and streak-ed-stripedy, calico-like, and sleek as bear fur in the rutting season.

I'd seen one in particular that had ketched my eye—this was earlier: a pided white and yallar critter, and straddled by as glossy a hunk of female meat as you ever slapped a eye-

ball on. I'm telling you, she was like the sunrise—yah, that was her name, Sunrise; and I misdoubt mightily if she had been mammied by some purty emigrant gal the chief had captured and liked so well he just kept for his squaw. She wasn't reddish, like the others, and she didn't have that nose that looked like a plow point you'd busted the sharp end off. She was silk in the sun. A princess, by durns, I'll have you know. I liked to fell all over myself admiring her and wishing I could eat her with a spoon.

But about stealing the hosses. The Colonel give the orders. Make a raid on the village and come off with every hoss present. So me, Jud Wilkes, who was known through the fort as the feller half-hoss and half-human, with a horse face and habits of a bucking mule, was give the orders to lead the way. Which I done. So we ketched the ponies one black night and made off with 'em, and put 'em in a willow pole corral. The Colonel smacked his fat lips and allowed, "That'll fetch 'em to taw."

And here's where the hoss-kissing rumor got started.

Me being like I am with brutes and suchlike, I was give the job sort of taming these animules. I done it like this. I got lumps of sugar from the mess—and the men would of lynched me if they'd found out—and stirred amongst the ponies with the sugar. I'd go up to one, caress his nose, and say, "Now, hoss, me'n you is brothers. Just open your mouth and shut your eyes, and you'll get one devil of a surprise." So after some talk like this, me having a way with critters, the hoss would open his mouth and I'd put my mouth nigh and blow in it. Then I'd give him the lump of sugar.

They wasn't none that dadburned

kissing stuff, I only blowed in his mouth. So he figgered that was part of the sugar deal, and after that ever blasted pony would eat out of my hand.

Well, all this fetched the Injuns, but not to taw. The fort woke one night maybe two in the morning and the ponies was stampeding. Before we could do anything about it the redskins had them scattered and gone. The rest they rounded up at their leisure.

Well, it throwed the Colonel into a mighty swivet. "It's a disgrace to this here fort. They'll recall me to Washington."

I could see where he'd be less useless there than here, but it wasn't for me to open my mouth and put my horse's foot in it.

"Them ponies got to be recaptured."

WE COULDN'T keep playing this with the Indians like a checker game, you steal my ponies and I'll steal them right back. But I let the Captain talk. The talk led to right where you'd expect it.

"Jud Wilkes," Captain Jim said, "you're elected."

"Me? I ain't running for nothing."

"You going to run back for something, though. We aim to descend upon that village by night, in the deep dark hours, when they ain't no moon nor nothing else, and this time when we ketch the Injuns' hosses the Colonel's got a trick up his own sleeve."

"What's that?" I reckon I was suspicious.

"He ain't talking. But the Colonel's tricks shore are tricky."

Well, the one picked out for me was trickier than that. A dozen or so of us was sent out by secret ways to approach the village about three of the morning opposite the windward side, to snatch the ponies again. Me being the hoss-kisser, it fell to me to be the kin pin in this trick. So we slunk around and after dark come creeping in on the offside of the village, with our own nags left some distance behind under cover of the alder bushes and willows at the water course, and only me to approach the corral where the ponies was kept.

"There'll be a guard, Private Wilkes," said the Captain.

"Yah," I snorted.

"You're to kiss him with this." He give me a knife about sixteen inches long, honed down to edge enough to shave.

"Steady hand, son. You give her a little twist like this." He demonstrated. "It hastens the operation."

Armed with this here piece of polished cutlery, I crawled on my belly all the way from the bushes to the corral. I knowed there'd be a redskin crouched nigh the gate. I got close enough to make out the hunk of him. I waited for my scent to float to the ponies. If they knowed me, they'd be just as still, thinking maybe they was fixing to get some of the white man's sweet stuff. When I knowed the nags had smelled me I edged in, silent as a ghost, and I ran that blade in the redskin as slick as slitting the throat of a shote. It ain't the kind of work I'd relish as a regular occupation, but I didn't shrink from it, having buried too many half-burnt bodies of my own kind of folks killed by these polecats.

With the bloody knife I slit the rawhide thongs to the gate and made little friendly noises to the ponies. They knowed me, all right. I didn't have time to do no kissing, even if I'd been in the mood. My comrades was watching from their end, and in no time we had the nags all out and moving silently off. If those Injuns had looked for a second attempt to steal their horses, they likely imagined we'd stampede them. They didn't miss their horseflesh till a blasted dog raised a howl, and by then I was a-straddle of the calico I'd seen that little lady ride, and my pals had the others in lead and we was galloping like the wind. Maybe we left one or two behind for seed, but we got away with thirty head, nigh as I could count.

Well, was the old Colonel gleeful. You'd of thought he give the nags sugar and the Indians' gullets cold steel.

"Boys, this time we'll fix 'em! By Judas we'll shoot the last hoss!"

I stared in the dawn at that pot-gutted imitation general. By nature

I'm a quiet feller. But my jaw fell open and words came out.

"Shoot 'em! You mean *kill* them Injun ponies?"

"Dead as daylight! Captain Jim, line the nags up and call the boys in line and we'll mow 'em down! By Judas then the redskins will be on foot."

I busted out sort of praying, I reckon. "Colonel Summerfield, that ain't treating them ponies right and it ain't treating me right!"

He glowered at me. "What you mean, Wilkes? What's that got to do with it?"

"But they *trusted* me—"

He let out a stream of profanity that sounded like a buzz saw edged with ambeer. What he said ain't fit to print alongside the whinny of a horse. But it was more'n plenty, and included lining me up with the ponies and feeding me hot lead. I reckon I had a nerve on me. But I talked right up to him.

"I didn't mind crawling out yan and sticking a knife in a redskin. But a hoss is a human being, which a Injun ain't."

Captain Jim put in, "Jud kisses 'em. The ponies, I mean." His grin was mean.

"Looky here," I pleaded. "But for me the Indians would still have their nags. Maybe I kiss 'em but I got 'em. Instead of slaughtering them, why not let's sell them?" It was coming to me fast, the plan. Ready-made, you might say. "The *Big Muddy* will be coming up tonight, bound for Council Bluffs."

THAT WAS a steamboat that made the Missouri in the fur trade down to St. Louis.

"It'll have the fur and hide barge. We can load the ponies on it and haul 'em to Council Bluffs and sell 'em to the Mormons. They say as how Mormons know the value of hoss flesh and woman flesh. I bet I can sell every pony here for thirty dollars a head and that'll buy all the luxuries you all been bellyaching about Washington not sending. How much is it?" I wasn't so good on figures.

Colonel Summerfield he run up

and down his fingers and put in his thumbs a couple times. "Nine hundred dollars." His jowls trembled at the profits. His piggy eyes took on a far off look, like he was feeling a great idea coming on—out of somebody else's head. "Well, now! That's a fine idee. Glad I thought of it." He mumbled some. "Maybe it would work out. The boat's due with some freight about ten o'clock tonight. If we can keep the ponies that long—"

Some of the other officers would get a new feather bed out of this trade, if it went through. The other way all they'd get was some horse hides.

Captain Jim and Colonel Summerfield worked out the details, which was nothing to speak of; and I and a squad of guards was set over the ponies, so the redskins wouldn't spring a surprise in broad day. I went among the critters and renewed my friendship with 'em. They wasn't no sugar left, but I rubbed their noses. The fellers ragged me good about kissing the horses. But they had to admit I knowed a hoss and he knowed me, and the trick would never have worked but for me.

The day passed with nothing worse than a spy slinking about down nigh the river bank and we shot at him and skeered him back in the river. I'd heerd tell how them redskins could lay just beneath the surface of the water like a sun perch and not wiggle a ear, only their noses out of the water; and we shot at everything that could have been a Injun nose. I made up my mind I was going to buy the pony what the princess had ridden. The job was give me to do the trading. I figured I could get enough extra by close bargaining to pay for the calico critter, and still give the Colonel his feather bed.

When night come we set a double guard around the ponies. About ten o'clock we heard the whistle of the *Big Muddy*.

"Hyar she comes, boys!"

The steamboat put in at the fort landing, and Colonel Summerfield talked to the boat captain, and we led the ponies on to the barge. It wasn't room enough with some other freight for the fort at Council Bluffs, so we had to tie up some of the beasties in

the boat's bow. There was a mess of hay put in for the ponies to masticate and keep 'em happy. My idea again. Nothing was too good for a horse. Captain Jim went along, and two other soldiers as guards. Out in the Big Muddy the *Big Muddy* chugged, and my Injun ponies gnawed timothy. There was a moon as big as flour barrel, and the smell of the river, and the smell of willow leaves in air cooling after a long hot day, and I laid on my back and counted the stars and figgered maybe when I got out of the army I'd marry this here little lady what rode the pony. It never occurred to me no red woman wouldn't wed a white boy, even if he did have a face like a horse.

I reckon we'd been pulling the river a solid two hours, and far as I could tell maybe the boat had made twenty of the fifty mile up to Council Bluffs. I reckon I'd dozed off a little, even if I was laying down among the hoofs of the ponies. I knowed they wouldn't hurt me. Me'n hosses is brothers. But I said that someplace else.

I dunno what it was, maybe that sixth sense you hear tell of. But I was awake all over in a wink, and just trembling in every nerve of me. A body don't often wake like that, knowing what he knows. But I read it among the ponies. They had smelt a friend. Not a white man like me. A redskin.

I lifted to my elbow and looked down through a mess of horse legs. I smelled Injun horses, moonlight and dry hay. I was mighty careful when I moved not to start something. I didn't even murmur to pacify the brutes. That'd of give me away. The only sound I heerd was the steady chug-chug of the engines, laboring at the current. I could see the dim shape of the captain up in the pilot house and then he disappeared. The pilot was navigating by the moonlight. Once the furnace doors was throwed open and the light shone a minute on the sky. But they was redskins all about me, by Judas, for I sensed 'em like the ponies.

If I'd started a yell, hell would of been to pay. This was a trick. What some stinking redskins could do was maybe cut the barge adrift and run

off with the ponies before the crew and soldiers could catch 'em. That didn't look possible, but then it didn't look possible what I'd done. It's the thing that don't look possible that works out—maybe.

Then I seen the skunk. He was crawling through the forest of legs. What he was after may have been me. I got out my trusty knife and made myself look like a bale of hay, and when he was close up I leaned over and run the knife in him, and I reckon he was the most surprised Pawnee on the Missouri, for he looked at me as indignant as if I'd done him dirt. He died with a brief ug-ggg.

How many others? How to give the alarm? Then what?

I shore didn't have to wait long for at least the last answer. If you can believe anything that low-down, some pole cat of a Pawnee set fire to the hay up there where the ponies were in the bow of the steamer. In a minute the blaze was going like a grass fire.

NOW IF YOU want to see something happen on a steamboat, you just listen to the yell of "Fire!" Somebody else yelled it. I was shoving through the horses in that direction just as the Injun dropped down among the brutes, thinking maybe to hide. The yell went in all directions and hell busted loose at both ends. On the way to where that dirty redskin was hiding I butted into another. It wasn't no time to do the job clean and nice. I simply kicked his face in with my heel and he tried to knife my leg and I gutted him. His blood squirted all over me. That's the way with killing Indians. It's lots cleaner slaughtering hogs back in Illinois. I talked to the ponies.

"Whoa, boy. Whoa thar. Nothing but another dead Injun."

But the fire was rising, the light was over the river, and the captain was bellowing and the pilot was heading for the shore, and I was talking calmly to the nags to keep down a stampede. And if I got to that other Indian me or him was going to meet our Maker. The bucket brigade was swinging the water from the river to the burning hay, and the

ponies on deck was milling and snorting and the devil was to pay and no pitch hot. I come to where the calico pony was. That was the one I aimed to buy.

"Hoss," I said, and I opened his mouth and blowed in it, "me'n you is brothers. You just set tight."

I smelt singeing hoss hair, all right. The ponies was screaming. You never heerd no sound like it. It tore my entrails. Nothing I could do, though. Then I seen the form and figger of the Indian that had started the fire. Little old sparemade Injun no bigger'n a minute. He was laying low among the ponies. Up on deck and on the texas the fire fighters was giving their all. You could have unhitched the barge, taken down the twin smokestacks and unbolted the wheel and nobody would of paid you any mind. That was the way the redskins had it figgered. Them spies had kept their noses out of the water and their eyes open and seen things. I could hear maybe a couple of 'em down there struggling with the chains that held the barge. It wa'n't no cinch, neither, unloosening them anchors.

But I was right on the redskin with my knife ready to slit him, whilst he was watching the carryings on putting out the fire. By now the blaze had caught the light woodwork and the wind was whipping it, and looked like the *Big Muddy* would wind up burnt to the water's edge.

Then the Injun seen me.

Me and that there Injun we just inspected each other. Me with my long knife, ready for more hot blood, that redskin ready for Lord knows what. But I looked in his eyes.

Her eyes.

It wa'n't no man. It was that blankety-blank blasted princess what I'd seen riding that caliker pony.

"Dog-rot dad-burn your stinking lowdown time!" I cussed that blasted female. I was plum put-out that ary woman I give my love to could be so trashy. When a man gives a female his heart, he gives her the most prized possession he owns, and he likes to think she respects the offering and is willing to try to live up to it. Here was a sort of angel I'd built up in my feelings and the huzzy

had just started a fire to burn a steamboat and mess up the big deal I was fixing to make.

I could of killed her. She didn't seem to have no knife or gun, nothing but her two bare hands. I couldn't run a blade through her. I just made a snatch at her and we rassled there in the little space between the horses. Some of the time we was down under one of the beasties. I choked her and she bit daylight out of me. I slapped her durn jaws so hard I bet she seen stars for weeks. She was a mighty good man, but I was a better man.

I pinioned her arms and held her, panting and sweating, the two of us. Overhead the fire was rising, eddying in the wind. The crew was yelling and the captain was cussing louder than ever. Somebody had kicked some of the ponies out in the river. I reckoned they were Injuns out there fixing to ride away. But I had me a princess and she had to be licked.

IT COME to me like this. You talk nice to a pony and rub its nose and open its mouth and blow your breath in his face, and give him some sugar.

A-hah! Well, me, I didn't have no sugar, and my breath was short and my nose was dripping blood. But my princess she was winded and when she laid still I ketched my own breath, and rubbed my nose on my shirt, and just set astride her while she went limp.

Meantime somebody, maybe Captain Jim, had come out of his customary coma and had caught sight of the Indians trying to undo the barge. Then you never heard such a mess of shooting. I dunno how many, if any, he killed. I was operating on my princess, using my horse sense on the lady.

I said, "Open your mouth."

She spat in my face.

"You—you—" And I leave for you the word I used. "Open your mouth, or else!"

She understood English. Maybe she had it from her mamma's knee. She used a name on me you don't often hear from the mouths of babies and never out of the mouth of a horse, which is fundamentally a gentleman.

I held her catlike claws down against the floor and I put my mouth down on hers, and when she tried to bite daylight out of me, I brung my knees up against her ribs and dislocated her ambition to chew me up alive. It took a lot more doing then when you instruct a horse, but in the end I got the little lady kissed. Boy, I may as well tell you, when I kiss 'em like this, they stay kissed! She wiggled her head from side to side and she tried to kick, but just like when you handle a hoss, in the end she give up and then when I kissed her it was the kind you don't give a horse.

You see, even while I was working on her, and listening to the racket of putting out fire, I could figure she was doing for her tribe just what I was trying to do for my tribe. We just had different tribes.

They was getting the flames under control. The chains had been too much for the Indians. Maybe the boys had plugged a few. I pulled my princess to her feet. She clung to me and the calico pony. She made noises. Bawling, maybe—that was the white gal in her. I've heard tell the Indian women don't cry, I dunno. This one didn't much, but some.

"There now," I patted her.

The captain cussed his last oath. The deckhands threw on the last bucket of water. The engines was still chug-chugging and the pilot was keeping the boat in the easy water in shore. The ponies was still quiet. Hadn't stampeded even when two redskins had bit the manure under their feet, and a white soldier had a terrible rattle with a pink princess.

"You're going on to Council Bluffs, Sunrise," I told her. "You got no call to be bedding up with them onory Pawnees. I'll learn you how to read and write and cipher and sleep in the white man's feather bed, and we'll raise lots of pinkish looking brats and no end of ponies. Have a ranch and stuff."

"I'd like to gut you," she said, her first statement.

In a way I had the headwood on her. She couldn't get away, and somebody'd have to explain how come she was here and what she was up to. Captain Jim and the captain of the

steamboat asked them logical questions.

"She come for her calico pony," I said.

"Calico pony hell!" Captain Jim liked to be Colonel Summerfield when off from the fort. "Didn't she come with those redskins that tried to burn the boat?"

"She come with them but she wanted her pony," I said. "She's a princess. She wouldn't take no part in no dirty plans."

"Yeah? Well, she ain't no Injun then."

"She ain't. Her mammy was a white woman."

The men examined her then. "Wash her up and let's see how white she is."

Sunrise scrubbed herself in the captain's room and came out with her hair fixed up a little. The men looked her over. "Looks better," Captain Jim commented. "What you fixing to do with her—trade her off to a Mormon for a mule?"

"I aim to wife her."

"Ah—so! Going to marry the lady, eh? Well, we got a mess of ponies to swap at Council Bluffs."

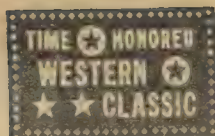
WE GOT there before morning. And you might think Sunrise would run away the minute she put her foot on land. But she never. It was that horse's kiss. Boy, what I give her was the kind that females, red, white and blue, lap up in great gobs. She was as meek and docile as a baby. When I swapped one of her tribe's ponies and skinned a Mormon, she only smiled. When I got thirty-five or forty dollars in gold she hid the difference in her bosom. A Mormon elder offered me a hundred dollars for her but I wouldn't trade. By evening the last Pawnee pony was sold. I turned nine hundred dollars over to Captain Jim.

"Now you can buy the Colonel a featherbed and washstand, and whatever else." I didn't say nothing about the extra hundred I had, and the calico pony. Me'n Sunrise was going to ride that nag back to the fort.

Ah yes—the hoss-kissing business. I'll tell you about that, soon's I finish about how delighted the Colonel was with his idea, and promoted me to

(continued on page 80)

by D. B. NEWTON



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Tommy had been seen
spurring madly out of
town.



Tommy Simms could make only a powdersmoke plea
now to keep his neck out of a hangnoose . . .

THERE WAS something hypnotic in the dance of the flames, and the shifting shadows they sent washing over the dark rocks, wriggling in the thick of the underbrush that ringed in the little campfire. Suddenly, Sheriff Joe Carter jerked his head up with a start and looked around, blinking, as he realized that he must have dozed off. The pipe had dropped from his mouth and gone out; the fire was lower than

he remembered it last, and the circling shadows had crept in a bit nearer around the camping spot.

But what had wakened him? He looked about; saw nothing but the dark tangled shadows, the tall black trees with their branches rocking slowly overhead, the silent stars. He could hear the cropping of the horses, staked out to grass. And nearby his deputy snored peacefully, a blanket-wrapped bundle seen vaguely in the

POWDERSMOKE REPRIEVE

play of the flames. It took a lot to rouse Al Evers out of a good sleep.

The sheriff grunted, shrugged his shoulders. It probably hadn't been anything—some small night animal stirring in the woods, or an owl hooting off somewhere. Nothing at all. And in the meantime, Evers had the right idea. Carter needed sleep himself. He wasn't as young as he used to be; and in a few hours it would be morning, with the promise of another hard day of tracking through the hills. He was a fool to sit around like this when he should be storing up needed rest.

Still, he hadn't felt like sleeping. He was worried. He'd wanted to sit there by the fire, with his pipe in his mouth and think...

He picked up the pipe now, from where it had fallen into the dirt; brushed it off, knocked the dead tobacco out of it into the palm of one horny hand. He had just returned it to his pocket when another sound—the snapping of a twig, loud as a rifle-shot—brought his head up again and held him there, hand part way out of the pocket, eyes staring, as a form materialized out of the shadows. There was first the faint white of a shirt, and of the face above it; then, silently, someone stepped into the glow of the campfire.

"Evening, Sheriff," said the newcomer.

Carter blinked, gulped once. "Tommy!" he exclaimed. "Tommy Simms! What—what—?"

And then he remembered suddenly the gun in its holster, which he had draped over the boulder behind his back, and started to reach for it.

"Don't bother about the gun, Sheriff," said the young man, in a resigned, tired tone, of voice that stopped his hand. "I ain't gonna make any trouble. I'm here to give myself up!"

Next moment he had lifted a six-gun from his own holster and dropped it at the sheriff's feet, where the metal rang against stone as it landed. Carter stared at the blue steel of it, shining in the firelight, and the cracked wooden butt. Then, without picking up the weapon, he looked up at the newcomer again, dazed.

"There's one bullet been fired," the latter went on, in a dull voice. "My pony broke her leg."

"I'm sorry, Tommy." Carter meant it. He thought of the little spotted mare, and remembered how much it had meant to the youngster. And then he recalled the muffled report that he and Evers had heard, that afternoon. The deputy had insisted that it was a pistol shot, but it had come so quickly and unexpectedly that Carter could not be sure; and at any rate they hadn't been able to decide from what direction, in those broad and tangled hills, the sound had issued.

"I knew I couldn't get away, afoot," Simms continued. "And I seen the fire, so I decided to come and surrender. Besides—God, Mr. Carter! Have you got any food you could spare me? I ain't eaten in two days!"

"Why—why sure!" The sheriff was already lumbering to his feet. "Set down, Tommy. I'll fix you something."

Simms obeyed, letting himself down beside the fire, where he sat hunch shouldered, staring into the flames. Carter put the coffee pot on the coals to warm up; he got a can of beans out of his saddlebags, ripped off the top with a clasp knife. Simms was too hungry to wait for them to be heated. He gulped them down cold, while Carter stood to one side and watched him, lips pursed in a frown of sympathy as he looked at the slight frame of the youngster.

BY THIS time, the noise had finally wakened the heavy-sleeping Al Evers.

The deputy sat up rubbing at his eyes. He stared stupidly for a moment at Simms before the sight of the youngster registered. Then he was throwing off his blankets and leaping up in one sudden motion; his hand reached for the sixshooter at his side, as Carter had done before.

"It's all right, Al!" the sheriff cut in, crisply. "Tommy ain't gonna make any trouble for us. He's give himself up—he's goin' in with us tomorrow, real peaceful. Ain't you, Tommy?"

Simms nodded over a forkful of beans, then thrust them into his mouth.

Evers eyed his bowed head doubt-

fully. "You sure this ain't some kind of a trick, Joe?" he demanded. "I ain't trustin' this hombre any too far, myself."

"It's all right," the sheriff repeated. "I'm willin' to swear to it. Tommy's had to kill his pony; he can't get away now. He sees the only sensible thing to do is to come along with us without makin' any fuss."

"Where's the money?" Evers demanded.

The boy—for Simms couldn't have been over twenty—looked up at him with his wide brown eyes. "I buried it," he replied.

"Buried it where? Out there someplace?" The deputy indicated the larger darkness of the night and the surrounding hills, beyond the circle of firelight.

But Simms shook his head. "No. Back in town—under a rock in the alley behind the Red Dog."

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment. Then Evers raised his head to look at the sheriff. "The damn kid's lyin'!" he snapped. "Why, he killed for that money! Would he be apt then to bury it right where he stole it, and come streakin' into the hills empty handed? Naw, Sheriff! He's cached the dough someplace out there in the rocks, and he probably intends to come back later and dig it up."

Simms faced the sheriff, in turn. "That ain't so, Mr. Carter!" he insisted. "It's just like I told you. I'll go into town with you and take you right to the place where I hid the money."

"Well, I guess you can't do any more than that," Carter agreed, scratching the back of his head. "So I suppose we'll have to leave it that way."

Evers turned away, growling, "I still think he's lyin'. He's got somethin' up his sleeve!"

But the sheriff saw nothing else to do but take the prisoner in with them next morning; they could check on his story easy enough, then. Meanwhile, the business could wait the few hours that remained till daylight.

Carter gave Simms some blankets and the kid curled up in them and dropped off at once into an exhausted sleep—unbound, despite the suspi-

cious deputy's insistence that the prisoner be tied up. Carter merely shrugged his shoulders at that suggestion; and Evers, grumbling a little, went back to his own blanket roll.

For a long time, the old officer stood between the silent figures, a troubled frown dragging at his brow as he looked down at Tommy Simms. The ache in his heart amounted almost to a physical pain. For he was thinking about Tommy's dad—Bert Simms, who'd been Carter's best friend in the old days. They'd ridden the same trails together, many a time. They'd worked on the same ranches, thrown up their jobs at the same time when the monotony of work palled on them. And, finally, they'd fallen in love with the same girl.

Now that girl was Bert Simms' widow. There was something pathetic and yet heroic in the fight she'd been putting up, these last ten years, to support herself and the boy on the little spread Bert had left them. She'd accept help from no one—not even Joe Carter, who'd have given her the shirt off his back if she could have used it. The going had been mighty tough, the debts piling up....

AND NOW, Tommy in trouble! Lying there in the sleep of exhaustion, he looked a lot like Bert had at his age. Not at all like a killer and a thief! And yet, the facts were plain. The kid had been pretty desperate lately over finances. Carter would have been glad to give him a job—any kind of a job; but there really wasn't anything Tommy could do in the sheriff's office, and his mother wouldn't have stood for any form of disguised charity. At last, Carter had heard that the kid was trying to borrow, without any luck.

Yes, the facts were plain enough! It was Tommy who'd been seen going into the private office at the rear of Tug Wyatt's Red Dog saloon, a couple of nights ago. And when one of the bartenders went in a few minutes later and found Wyatt dead in front of the open safe, where the saloon owner had been kneeling when the blow that caved in his skull caught him from behind, there was the open window to show how Tommy had

slipped out with over a thousand dollars from the rifled strong box.

It was Tommy who'd been seen spurring madly out of town toward the hills, as hard as he could make his pony dig hoofs into the dust. It was Tommy whom Carter and his deputy had been trailing now these last two days. And now the kid had surrendered, and was going to take them back and point out the place where he'd buried the stolen money; money that bore the stains of murder—

It was hard to get to sleep; he tossed and turned for a long while, and when he did drop off, rested only fitfully. Unlike the deputy, Evers, he was a light sleeper, and awoke more than once during the brief stretch of darkness that gradually faded into the gray of dawn.

And then, suddenly, he came awake all at once with a premonition that something was wrong. It was broad daylight now. Carter sat bolt upright, and received a crushing blow on the side of the head!

It laid a blinding flash of light across his brain, and stretched him out again upon the ground. Deep, deep into the cool waters of oblivion he sank. He was dimly aware of confusion about him; of hands that suddenly seized him, shook him, while a voice shouted: "Hey, Sheriff! Sheriff! Wake up!" Then, as suddenly, the hands let go of him, to once more into darkness.

He struggled desperately, and by sheer force of will dragged himself back to consciousness. To a gun's blasting, and to the sound of hoofbeats beginning and drumming rapidly away to silence. With an effort, he got his eyes open.

Suddenly, a noise behind him pulled his head around. "Al!" He exclaimed. But his voice was lost in the blast of Evers' revolver, as the deputy plugged another bullet in the wake of the fleeing horseman. Then he was lifting into the saddle of his claybank, clamping in the spurs. Carter got a look at his face—grim, determined. And Evers shot away after that other bronc whose hoofbeats had faded out of hearing.

Alone, the sheriff got his hands under him and pushed himself erect. He

was still groggy, but his brain was clearing rapidly. He looked around. There beside him lay the heavy stick from the dead fire, with which he'd been clubbed. Yonder were Tommy Simms' blankets—empty. And Evers' scattered bedroll.

There was nothing left but the spavined, brokendown cayuse that the two lawmen had brought along for a pack horse. With the bitterness of a broken trust inside him, the sheriff strapped on his six-gun and then went over and got the hackamore. He didn't even have a saddle. And when he dragged himself aboard, the animal objected to being ridden bareback and tried to buck.

CARTER brought him into line with a firm hand. Turned the brute's head in the direction that those other horses had gone, and clapped heels to much-scarred flanks.

In a few minutes he was below the trees, and came out to a place on the mountain's side where he could see off and down toward the twisted bottom lands. His keen eye quickly spotted the two riders—Al Evers, hot in pursuit; and Simms on the sheriff's own horse, streaking away with a backward glance for the deputy. A plume of smoke blossomed from the gun in Evers' hand, another. But the shots went wide; and even as the double sound of them floated back to the sheriff, both disappeared beyond a rise.

Mouth a hard line, Carter put his cayuse after them. Evers, anyway, hadn't been fooled. He'd sure made a fuss last night about trusting Simms and not tying him up—the sheriff remembered that in humiliation. And this morning, when he woke up to find the kid making his getaway, he'd tried his best to rouse his boss; Carter recalled the hands that had shaken him, the voice that called to him through the fog. But the blow Simms had dealt the sheriff with the club had been too effective; and Evers had had to light out in pursuit, alone.

Never again, Carter told himself bitterly. Never again would he let himself be tricked the way Tommy Simms had fooled him, by playing on his sentimental affection for the kid's folks!

The ground rolled away beneath the hoofs of his bronc, like cloth off a bolt. They splattered through a stream, up a shallow rise and down into the trough beyond. It was minutes now since Carter had seen anything of his deputy or the fugitive, and maybe he'd lost both of them. But he went on.

Now the ground was lifting again, and there were trees ahead. They came toward him at a rush, and closed around him. And as his bronc shot in under their shadow, gunfire began somewhere in front of him.

On the farther slope, the sheriff's horse that Tommy Simms had borrowed was down—probably with one of Evers' bullets in its head. And Simms, sprawled full length behind its body, had the rifle in his hands and was firing across the saddle.

Al Evers had dropped from his mount and into the protection of a boulder that thrust up from the floor of the cup. Crouched there, he returned the other's fire with his six-gun. Neither of the two was aware of the sheriff's approach, and no one noticed him now as he waited in the fringe of the trees watching the gun battle, and wondering what to do.

He was still sitting there, unable to take a hand, when suddenly Tommy Simms' rifle jammed. He saw the kid struggling with the ejector, trying desperately to get the gun working again. And he heard Evers' yell of triumph as he, too, saw what was wrong.

Immediately, the deputy was out from behind his boulder and running toward the fallen horse. Tommy worked with the rifle, frantically, as he came; then, at the last minute, flung the useless weapon aside and scrambled up. Started to run. But by that time Evers was right on top of him. The deputy lifted his gun and slammed a bullet past the kid's ear, yelling for him to stop.

That slug so close to his head convinced him. Simms dragged to a halt; turned slowly to meet his captor.

"All right, kid!" Al Evers' words carried clear to the sheriff's ears, in the still morning air. "What do you know about that money?"

"I'm not saying a thing!" Simms' voice sounded scared, but determined.

"The hell you ain't!"

SUDDENLY, the deputy lashed out with a fist that caught Tommy full in the face, dropped him to the ground. Evers picked him up again. "Talk up, do you hear me? That damn fool of a sheriff ain't here to help you now, so you and me are gonna talk plain!"

The sheriff, who had been about to ride down and join the scene, stopped now. Bewildered at those strange words, and the ugly tone that had crept into his deputy's voice. He shook his head a little.

He heard Evers say: "What did you see, there at the Red Dog?"

Tommy's lips were tight as he faced the other, unspeaking. Evers cursed, struck him again—a heavy blow. A thin line of red had sprung from the corner of the kid's mouth when the deputy picked him up a second time.

Evers repeated, "What did you see?"

"I saw you ducking out of the window just as I came into Tug Wyatt's office to try and borrow some money, and found him dead on the floor. I followed you and watched you bury the money out in the alley; but my gun was hangin' on my saddle horn and I couldn't stop you. So then I ran back to the Red Dog for help, and heard a crowd in the back room, talkin'. And suddenly I realized everybody thought I'd done it!"

"Go on!" The deputy's voice was a hard rasp.

"There's nothin' more to say. I knew my word wouldn't stack up against a deputy's, so while I could I got my pony and beat it out of town."

The sheriff, dumfounded, heard those words rush from the kid's battered lips. And he heard, too, Evers' harsh chuckle.

"Well," the deputy gritted, "you're damn right your story wouldn't count against mine! But I ain't gonna take any chances of anybody hearing you. Because, if you only knew it, you're just on the verge of gettin' killed tryin' to escape from the law—"

The six-gun in his hand winked back the sunlight as it came up into line. Sheriff Carter saw that, gasped; saw what Evers was about to do. Shoot Tommy Simms down in cold blood!

A wild yell dragged from the sher-

iff's lips. He was digging for his own gun as he sent the bronc charging down into the hollow. Evers whirled, stared. Then hatred twisted his features as he snapped up his revolver and pulled trigger—at the sheriff.

Carter's six-gun cracked at the same moment. But his bullet missed; because the nag he rode was gunshy. Carter grabbed for the bridle—too late. Next moment he hit the earth.

He lay there gasping, helpless, staring into the mouth of Evers' six-gun. Tried to drag up his own gun.

Then Tommy Simms was wading in, with a wild grab for Evers' gun arm. The deputy whirled to meet the charge, arcing the weapon around again. But the boy had a grip on his wrist; and at the same time he was driving in a wide swing at the face of the other. The blow drove Evers back.

A sudden twist, and the gun popped out of Evers' fingers. And then they were toe to toe, slugging. The deputy was bigger, heavier. But Tommy was remembering those blows in the mouth. And he was fighting for the sheriff's life, too...

Evers thought he saw an opening, and tried for it. Simms rolled with the punch, strung the deputy out in an awkward position as the blow missed. Then he handed back a fist against the jaw, and stood panting, waiting, as the deputy fell—

"Naw, he didn't get me, kid," the sheriff said, gulping at air to fill his empty lungs. "But—but I still don't

savvy, quite. Why did you let me think last night you were guilty?"

"That was a hint to Evers," Tommy explained, "to start him worrying. I was hoping that if he thought I knew it was him killed Wyatt, he'd try to keep me from getting to town. Maybe make a play that would incriminate him."

"Well?"

"He almost got away with it, Sheriff! He planned to make it look like he'd had to shoot me, as I tried to escape; so he clubbed you to get you out of the way. But while he was saddling the horses I got to you and shook you and tried to wake you up. And when I couldn't do that, I managed to knock him down a minute while I took one of the brons and got away."

Carter shook his head in open amazement, then, as he stared at the other. "You got nerve, kid!" he exclaimed. "Plenty of nerve! Your dad—Bert Simms—he was like that."

The sheriff glanced over at Evers.

"I reckon I'll be needin' a new deputy now, after they give that snake what's due him. I could use a man like you, Tommy—you got the makings of a good lawman. How about it?"

The joy in the kid's eyes brought happiness to the sheriff, then. Mainly because he was thinking about Tommy's mother. Bert Simms' widow was going to be happy, too, when she heard. ● END

WHAT THE PAINT MEANT

by BESS RITTER

SINCE THE Indian who lived in the Western states 100 years ago honestly believed that his gods could easily understand his inner thoughts and wishes if they were painted in code on his face, he marked it carefully in meaningful designs.

If he wanted to say, "Our tribe suffers of thirst. Send rain soon," he painted multi-colored rain drop streaks over his entire complexion. A message which conveyed the thought, "Someone is stealing our children, squaws, ponies and meat.

Help us find and punish the thieves," consisted of a combination of white chips and black triangles. The latter went on the cheeks and the white marks were featured on the forehead and chin.

Multicolored lines starting at the mouth and spreading out spokedwise to the hair and chin, said, "We're hungry. Our game has disappeared. Help us find good hunting." He also covered his body with vivid designs and colors, to indicate old wounds that he wanted to have avenged.

● END

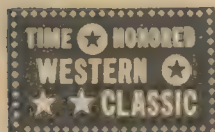
MAN BEHIND THE STAR

by LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Would this night's violence brand Dan Marlin the first fearless lawman Logan range had ever known — or the last ruthless bushwhacker? —

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The bullet sent Lobo
staggering back.



FOR THREE days and nights, across the blistering inferno of desert, young Dan Marlin had trailed Lobo Hawkins. Not once during those three days and nights

had he seen the fugitive outlaw, yet he had known each hour he was drawing closer; two days past he had found the remains of Lobo's campfire stone cold, but the ashes of last night's had still been warm when he reached it early today; the tracks of Lobo's horse, so old yesterday that they were half filled with sifting sand and earth, were now clean-cut and freshly imprinted; twice, in the last hour, the crystalline desert air had been distinctly tainted with the pungently dusty tang of a recent passing.

So Lobo was just ahead: even now, less than a quarter mile away, he would be making camp at Piute Springs. Because Lobo, like any other man, could not survive without water, and in nearly fifty square miles Piute Springs was the only known water. It was as simple as that.

Dan had dismounted in the dry-bed of a narrow wash. To reach Lobo's camp he would have to leave this concealment and cross at least two hundred yards of open desert, to do which, unseen by Lobo, would be

quite impossible during daylight. So he sat on a rock in the gathering twilight, awaiting the night, a controlling patience relaxing his rugged face and tall, hard, wolf-lean body.

Already the darkening sky was a deep violet; the color almost, Dan noticed, of Cynthia Starling's eyes. As he thought of Cynthia a perplexed frown creased his forehead. He had been engaged to her for almost a year, yet she had so consistently put off their marriage that, of late, he had become half convinced she no longer intended to become his wife at all. And he didn't know why; except that the girl, during these last few months, had seemed actually to fear him. It was baffling, unexplainable, and it left him, with its implied loss, bleakly desolate.

At this moment there was no connection in his mind between Cynthia and his present pursuit and attempted arrest of Lobo Hawkins—it was only later that he bitterly realized how this night's violence and the dark events that followed had been fated from the beginning to bring his devotion to Cynthia to its final devastating crisis.

The lonely desert night had descended now, enveloping the vast wastelands in hot, darkly sinister silence. Stars flashed hard and brilliant in the purple dome of sky, and the distantly barking sob of a coyote wailed with an infinite sadness. Dan examined his gun; leaving his horse hitched to a gnarled mesquite, he slipped cautiously up the wash afoot.

He advanced to a point roughly abreast Piute Springs, and there worked his way up the steep bank of the arroyo and out onto the level salt flat. It gleamed faintly in the starlight, spreading away with a dark ghostly glimmer into a vastly desolate plain. Somber black mountains rimmed faraway horizons, as though pasted flat and jagged against that planet-spangled sky. About a hundred yards directly ahead loomed the shadowy oasis of stunted mesquite, greasewood and lacy tamarisk surrounding Piute Springs, and from this dwarfish growth emanated dimly a glow of reddish light, radiated, Dan knew, by the dying embers of the unsuspecting outlaw's fire.

THE TALL young sheriff stalked slowly forward, alert, cautious. He hoped he could take Lobo alive, without violence. But he knew the big outlaw was a killer, would make a fight if given half a chance. Behind Lobo were an unknown number of crimes of violence, though his most recent outrage for which Dan now sought him was the holdup of the Logan stage, including the stealing of three thousand dollars. It was not such a great sum, but it had belonged to Dave Wilton, represented that old miner's sole stake in life with which he had intended to safeguard the remaining years for himself and his ailing wife. Dan was even more concerned with returning that money to Dave than the actual bringing of Lobo Hawkins to justice. He intended to give Lobo his chance to surrender peacefully; but if the bandit refused, which he most likely would, then the issue must be settled violently, in one briefly thunderous flame of gunfire.

Dan's cautious advance had brought him to the fringe of gnome-like mesquites. He crouched there, staring patiently forward. Lobo, huge and hulking, was sitting cross-legged before the fire embers, sucking on a pipe, and Dan could see the dull gleaming of a gun butt, low-swung on his massive thigh. A scant ten feet away a horse was tethered in the chaparral, saddled and ready for instant flight. A bubbling coffee pot stood on the fire embers, giving off a hissing little curl of steam. Swinging silently erect, Dan leveled his gun. He spoke sharply, making his words slap suddenly against the unsuspecting bandit:

"Up with 'em, Lobo! Pronto! One wrong move and I'll cut you down!"

Lobo's huge body froze motionless. Only his head moved slowly, swung on his thick neck to stare through the darkness at Dan's high vague shape. Dan saw his eyes gleaming in the fireglow like a wolf's.

"You're covered, Lobo!" he warned again. "Just lift your hands; then stand up."

Casually, almost insolently, the outlaw elevated his hands above his head. He came slowly, as ordered, to his feet. But in his very obedient movements Dan sensed the leashed crafty menace, the deadly consideration of

the gambler estimating his chances and shaping his unknown lethal play.

With his six-shooter still leveled, Dan strode forward. When he was less than twenty feet away he saw the outlaw suddenly wiggle both hands. It was only a slight movement, yet enough to confuse briefly Dan's trigger-poised attention; and in that swift instant Lobo's right foot shot abruptly forward, tipping over the coffee pot on the fire embers. A hissing fog of steam exploded upward, like a white cloud, between outlaw and sheriff. At the same moment Dan sensed, rather than actually saw, the big bandit plunge violently aside, ripping up his gun. They fired together, but both were bursting into whirling sideways movement now, and both missed. Dan heard a whine of snarling lead blending with the steady thunder of Lobo's gun, felt his sombrero explode upward from his head. Then he saw the big bandit rushing backward through the chaparral. Aiming coolly he fired at the other's flashing gun, loosed a jolting roar of three jammed shots. The dodging outlaw swerved abruptly; he plunged suddenly to ground, and lay writhing there like a huge stricken beast.

Dan strode up to him, cautiously, his gun, with only one unfired shell remaining in it, still leveled. But Lobo was no longer bluffing; a bullet had cut cleanly through his right shoulder, and, in the shock of his sudden fall, he had dropped his weapon.

"Game's up, Lobo," Dan told him. "That shoulder wound won't kill you; I'll fix it up, give you a little rest, then we're heading for town."

Lobo glared up sardonically, grunted. "You've won the first hand, pilgrim," he conceded. "But the game isn't over."

DAN SHRUGGED. He searched the huge outlaw for further weapons, tied his feet and good arm, then cleaned and dressed the wounded shoulder. He threw more wood on the fire, and in its ruddy flare helped the ashen-faced Lobo to sit with his back to a mesquite.

"Now where's the money?" Dan demanded. "You took around three thousand from the Logan stage. It be-

longed to old Dave Wilton, and he needs it bad. It'll save time if you tell me where it is."

"It's where you'll never find it," taunted Lobo.

"It'll go easier with you if we get the money back," Dan reminded.

"That's what you say now," retorted Lobo. "But after you once got your hands on it you'd laugh in my face."

Dan shrugged. He made a careful search of the outlaw's camp, his saddle bags, all his equipment, but failed to find the stolen money. He turned back to Lobo.

"I'm still giving you a chance to come clean, Lobo. Where's that money?"

Lobo's lips snarled back in a wolfishly taunting grin. "Maybe I gave it to charity," he mocked.

"You've either cached it somewhere, or passed it to one of your coyote friends to hold," Dan growled. "All right; if you won't talk, we might as well get started for town. After you're locked up maybe you'll change your mind."

"Not a chance," Lobo sneered. "Maybe you'll get me to town, even lock me up. But there ain't the jail built that can hold me. I told you, pilgrim, that all you'd won was the first hand. I'll win the next, and don't ever forget that."

BACK IN Logan three days later, just after Lobo Hawkins was jailed, Dave Wilton hobbled into Dan's adobe office. Dave was a lean old man, gnarled and twisted with rheumatism, gray of beard and hair. His pale eyes gazed a little desperately at the young sheriff seated behind the battered desk.

"Well, son," he greeted, "so you finally caught Lobo?"

Dan glumly nodded. "He's locked up now, Dave. But—Dave, he didn't have that money on him, and he won't talk. I don't figure there's any way to make him talk either. The way things look now—well, I reckon your money's gone for good."

The old man's lips tightened. He turned half away, gazing out the window for a bleak instant. But then he

looked back at Dan and smiled. "That's all right, son," he said. "You've done your best."

Dan studied him moodily. "That money was uncommon important to you, eh, Dave?"

"Well." The old miner shrugged. "I'm stove up, and I reckon my working days are about over. Sarah ain't well, and the doc tells me I need to get her down out of this high country—hell now, what am I belly-aching for! No, no, the money didn't amount to much; we'll get along."

"Mother Sarah is a fine old lady," Dan said. "That time I came down with the pneumonia six years ago she took me in, saw me through it; if she hadn't I wouldn't be sitting here alive now. I'm not the only one; reckon she's spent most of her life taking care of folks."

"Wouldn't be happy if she wasn't," Dave said. He grinned. "I recollect the day I first met her, forty years ago—she had her arm around the neck of an orphan colt and was feeding it milk from a bottle! Well, well, I'll have to be getting along, son. Say—if you hear of any odd jobs around—I mean—that is—well, just let me know, will you, son?"

The old man hobbled out of the office. His thin back seemed even more bent than when he had come in a few minutes before, more bitterly and hopelessly slumped. Dan sank back in his chair, his eyes moody as he rolled a cigarette. He commenced to think of the thirty-five hundred dollars he had been patiently banking away these last three years, the stake with which he hoped to marry Cynthia Starling. That money could be a blessing to old Dave and his wife. It could even be made to look as though it has been unexpectedly recovered from Lobo after all. To do that though, Dan told himself, would mean putting off his own marriage a couple more years at least. But then he'd begun to believe that Cynthia no longer intended to marry him anyway. What was wrong with that girl lately?

Suddenly he knew he had to have a show-down with her. He decided to ride out and see her tonight, right after supper, to make her speak out one way or the other, either agree to marry him or end it finally.

CYNTHIA STARLING was a slim pretty girl, with dark hair and eyes—and an almost fierce pride. Stubbornly, since the death of her father a year past, she had lived on alone at the homestead cabin a mile north of town. She had accumulated a little herd of cattle and ran them as efficiently as any man. She was determined to make her own way, to be beholden to no one. Admiring her spirit, Dan still didn't like the way she expressed it. He thought it was neither right nor safe for a pretty young woman like Cynthia to be living off alone like that. He had often talked with her about it, tried to get her to stay in town, but the more he argued the more determined she became to take care of herself in her own way. Nothing would harm her, she insisted; she had added recently, more pointedly, that since Dan had become a peace officer he suspected everyone, saw brutality in everyone, was himself becoming hard and cruel. That bewildered Dan; he didn't know how to answer her.

It was dark when he reached Cynthia's cabin that night. Having heard him ride up, she opened the kitchen door, stood framed against the lamp-light behind, young and slim and vitally appealing. As he left his horse and walked forward, she stepped back into the kitchen, smiling and telling him to come in. Following her inside, he closed the door. He didn't see two riders drifting in through the night shadows off to the left, didn't see them, a moment later, conceal their horses in a clump of mesquite a hundred yards west, then crouch there, silently and ominously, watching the lamplit cabin.

Dan sat in a chair beside the kitchen table, his blunt fingers moodily shaping a cigarette. Cynthia moved restlessly around the room. She said, "I hear you caught Lobo Hawkins."

Dan nodded indifferently, lit his cigarette. "Cynthia," he told her, "I came here to have a special talk with you tonight. I want to get it off my chest right off."

"Yes?" Her quick glance was a little troubled, half fearful. "What is it?"

"Just when are you going to marry me?"

"Oh, Dan, I—"

"I've been waiting a long time, Cynthia. I've money enough banked away. But lately I've got the idea that you'd changed some way, that maybe you no longer wanted to—"

"It's you, Dan, not me, that's changed."

He glanced up in surprise. "Me? Changed? How do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand," she told him a little wearily. "Because I guess you—you don't even know how you've changed. And I don't understand it myself, except—" She looked at him uncertainly. The sheriff's star on his coat lapel gleamed faintly in the lamplight. It seemed to hold her troubled gaze, to fascinate her almost morbidly. She murmured, her tone curiously bleak, "I—I heard in town you shot Lobo Hawkins."

"Just winged him." Dan shrugged. "He'll be all right. You're dodging my question, Cynthia. When are you going to marry me?"

She stood in front of him, slender and straight, gazing at him. Her dark eyes were a little misty, as with unshed tears. "You only winged Lobo, Dan. Was it just an accident you only wounded him—or did you try not to kill him?"

"I tried to kill him," Dan replied with an honest grimness. "He had his gun out, and it was either him or me. It was my job to get him anyway I could. So I tried to kill him, but he was on the move and the light was bad, and I only winged him. Why?"

"There's your answer, Dan."

"My answer? What do you mean?"

HER BREAST rose and fell with a little sigh. "I've made up my mind, Dan. I'll never marry you; I can't marry you. I want you to go now, and not come back. It—it's better if we just don't see each other any more."

He had feared this thing, and yet now that it was upon him, he was still profoundly shocked; she had never seemed so completely desirable as now, in this moment when he believed finally that he had lost her. "But why, Cynthia?" he insisted. "What's made you change? What have I done?"

"It's not what you have done, but what's been done to you. I can't ex-

plain it; it's only what I feel, Dan. It's just—well, a year ago I loved you. I don't love you now, and I guess I never can again. That—that's final, Dan."

There just wasn't any answer to that. He gazed at her for a soberly bitter instant, and then, suddenly he accepted his defeat. He took it like a good gambler, played the cards as they came. He still didn't know why she had changed toward him this way, but he did know that explanation, so long as she had changed, no longer made any difference. He stood up abruptly.

"All right, Cynthia," he said. "If you feel that way there just isn't anything more for me to say, I reckon. I still can't figure this, but you're asking me to go—so, well, I'll go."

He turned and walked to the door. "Good night, Cynthia," he said.

"Good night, Dan—goodbye."

He went to his horse and swung bitterly into the saddle. He wheeled and rode back toward town. Those two men, still crouched in the mesquite a hundred yards west, watched him go; they watched until his high riding shape vanished through the darkly brooding night, and then their gaze returned to the lamplit cabin, with patient ominousness, where the girl was now alone.

When the door closed after Dan, Cynthia sank down in a chair. She stared blankly at the floor. Two tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes, rolled down her cheeks. They were not for the Dan Marlin who had just left; they were for the Dan Marlin she had known, and loved, a year before. But that Dan Marlin, of a year past, was only a tender memory now; he had, in her mind, as irrevocably vanished as though he had died.

She went into the next room, undressed and crept into bed. For a time she lay on her back, wide-eyed, staring at the darkness. Never in her life had she known such loneliness, so solitary a desolation, as in these dark moments. She fell finally into a troubled well of sleep, confused with bewildering dreams. She thought she saw Dan Marlin, standing before her, young and rugged and eager, laughing. She started toward him, wanting only to fling herself happily into his

arms, and suddenly his face changed, darkened with sardonic cruelty, and before her eyes he seemed to change into a fearsome mocking monster. She cried out wildly, tried to run from him, and felt him clutch her arm. And then she was sitting bolt upright, wide awake, and out of the darkness some one's hand had clutched her bare arm.

She heard herself scream instinctively, heard a muttered imprecation, glimpsed two shadowy shapes, and then a blanket was swept smotheringly over her. As she struggled frantically, and uselessly, rough hands bundled her swiftly into the blanket, tied her helpless. She was lifted up by her feet and shoulders, and writhing, twisting, was carried outside, hoisted up before a rider on a horse. Then she felt herself swept forward, through the dark mysterious night, the thunder of hoofs roaring swiftly beneath her.

DAN MARLIN ate supper in the Palace Restaurant that next night. It was about seven o'clock when he left the eating place, sauntered back up the wooden sidewalk to his office a block away. The sage-tanged twilight was deepening, stars commencing to flash in the pale sky above. Swinging into his office, Dan lit the oil lamp. Suddenly he drew motionless, the smoking match still in his hand, staring at a rock on top of his desk beneath which lay a scrawled note. It had been left here, apparently, while he had been out to eat. He stepped forward, lifted the rock, picked up the note. As he read it his lean face settled into grim startled lines. The note said:

Cynthia Starling's your girl. We caught her last night and we got her where you can never find her. Bring Lobo Hawkins to Eagle Rock at twelve o'clock tonight and turn him loose. We'll be close by with the girl. When Lobo's free we'll let the girl go. If you don't do this you'll never see the girl again. You can figure out for yourself what will happen to her.

For another instant Dan stared blankly at that shocking message; then he strode violently out of the office, swung to the saddle of his big roan standing at the hitch-rack. Wheeling the horse, he rushed it out of town. Fifteen minutes later he

reined up before Cynthia's cabin, leaped to the ground. The cabin was dark, apparently deserted. He ran inside, struck a match, and lit the oil lamp. Whirling to the cooking stove he laid his hand on top of it, found the iron lid cold. There had been no fire here since the day before. He picked up the lamp and hurried into the bedroom. The bed was in disarray, covers strewn across the floor. A couple of chairs were overtugned, evidence of some briefly sinister struggle. Even Cynthia's garments lay scattered about, showing how she had been dragged from her bed and hustled away without even a chance to dress. He saw now how certainly that note had been no bluff, that the ominous significance of this thing that had happened could be no darker.

He ran back outside, leaped into the saddle and raced back to town. He strode into the office, paced angrily back and forth. He had some bitter thinking to do, and he had to do it fast. He had to decide whether to turn loose a prisoner it was his sworn duty to hold, or, not doing this, to know that by his own act he had brought upon Cynthia Starling an ending so starkly horrible he dare not even vision it.

He considered briefly several ruses whereby he might seem to agree to this sinister demand, free Cynthia, yet still hold his prisoner. But such plans were too risky; all of them held too great a chance of failure, of leaving Cynthia at the mercy of men who, Dan flatly knew, had no mercy.

He thought of old Dave Wilton, and Dave's ailing wife, Sarah. Well, he could handle that end of it; he would simply take the money he had put aside for his marriage to Cynthia, and, as he had considered before, turn it over to Dave in such a way that Dave would think he had recovered it from Lobo.

It was his legal duty not to free Lobo, but it was also his human duty to save the life, when he could, of any innocent person, and, in this moment, Cynthia was that suffering innocent person. In freeing his prisoner, of course, he would himself be committing a crime—but only to forestall a greater one to Cynthia. To prevent a crime, he, a peace officer, had to com-

mit one. He saw it plainly enough now, two duties facing him, and the greater one, the undeniable one, was to save at all cost, to save rather than simply to punish.

IN THE CENTER of a wide desert canyon, eighteen miles south of town, reared Eagle Rock, a huge loftily soaring pinnacle. Here Dan reined up, three hours later, leading a horse on which Lobo Hawkins was bound. The night was moonlit, weirdly patterned with shadow and rock and gnarled mesquite. Glancing cautiously around, Dan swung down from the saddle, untied Lobo's feet and helped him to dismount. He pressed his gun against the outlaw's back.

"Friends of yours have taken a girl," he informed him, "and they've agreed to exchange her for you here. When they show up you warn 'em to keep their distance until we parley. If they try any crooked play, I'll shoot you first. You tell 'em that."

Lobo nodded, his dry chuckle like the whirl of a rattlesnake. "Told you, hombre," he mocked, sneering hatred in his voice, "that all you won was the first hand, told you I'd win the next and that's just what I'm doing. We don't have to wait for the boys; I can call 'em up."

Lobo gave a long, peculiarly quavering whistle. After a moment, some distance away, an answer shrilled eerily back. "Here they come," said Lobo.

Off to the left a stocky man had appeared, holding a rifle, advancing cautiously now from a tangle of chaparral.

"Tell him to keep his distance!" Dan warned.

Lobo nodded, waited until the man had come on a few steps, then shouted to him to stand still. "Your play now," he told Dan. "Go ahead and talk to him."

"I'll turn Lobo loose," Dan called to the man, "only after I see the girl, and know you've set her free."

"All right," the stocky one shouted back. "I'll send the woman out to you, but as she walks toward you, you send Lobo toward me. I'll have the girl covered; if you don't loose Lobo, or shoot at him, then I'll cut her down."

The man called over his shoulders to some one back in the chaparral. A

moment later Cynthia stepped out of the mesquite, into the bright moonlight. She was bare-footed, a blanket clutched closely about her, her disheveled hair clouding down her back. Walking past the stocky man with the rifle, she continued towards Dan. The man leveled his rifle at her back; he shouted, "Now let Lobo come over here to me!"

Dan had already unbound Lobo's hands; he shoved him forward. The bandit, as he walked ahead, snarled back venomously, "I always play the last card, hombre; maybe I even have another ace in the hole right now."

Cynthia continued toward Dan. Lobo walked on until he was abreast of her. He took one step past her, then whirled like a cat, grabbed her suddenly and jerked her against him as a shield. He shouted to the man with the rifle:

"Cut down that dang sheriff! He shot me when he caught me, and I aim to pay him back now, plenty!"

The stocky man swerved his rifle, fired instantly at Dan. But even as the gun crashed, Dan flung himself instinctively forward, landing flat on his chest in the sand. His own gun reared; he loosed a cracking volley at the rifleman. The man spun suddenly, dropping his weapon. He fell on all fours, screaming with pain, and scampered that way for the brush like a wounded animal.

At the same instant Lobo let out a hoarse yell; he rushed sideways into the concealing chaparral, dragging Cynthia with him. Dan leaped up, raced after him. He plunged into the mesquite, saw Lobo suddenly lunge out from behind a rock, with a gun in his hand now, followed closely by a third man. Lobo and Dan fired point-blank at each other. Dan felt a bullet slant shatteringly across the top of his head, staggered blindly, saw Lobo falling, and that second man whipping up a gun. Lobo's bullet had barely grazed Dan's head, yet he was half stunned and stumbled to his knees. He tried weakly to drag up his gun, glimpsed helplessly the third man aiming directly at him. Then Cynthia rushed suddenly into view, behind that aiming figure, lifted both hands in which she held a flat rock. She

crashed it against the back of the man's head, and he fell straight forward, his gun harmlessly exploding against the ground. Cynthia flung out her arms, crying:

"Dan! Dan!"

LATE THE next evening, his head bandaged, young Sheriff Dan Marlin sat glumly in his lamplit office. He looked up presently as the door opened, was a little surprised to see Cynthia Starling come in. She walked over to the desk, stood looking down at him.

"Dan," she said, "I hear you gave Dave Wilton three thousand dollars today, that you told him you found it after Lobo Hawkins was killed last night, that it was the money Lobo had stolen."

Dan gazed steadily at her. "That's what I told Dave," he admitted.

"Only you didn't find that money," Cynthia reminded. "The two injured bandits captured last night didn't know where it was hidden. Only Lobo knew, and now that he is dead it never will be found. Dan Marlin, you gave your own money to Dave Wilton, practically every cent you have in the world."

Dan looked embarrassed. "Dave and Sarah needed that money; the way I felt, I just had to give it to them."

"I know," Cynthia said. "And your giving it to them that way has made me more ashamed than I ever was before."

"Made you ashamed?" Dan stared at her.

"Before you became sheriff, Dan, I loved you," the girl said. "But I thought being a lawman had changed you terribly, exposed you too much to killing and violence, made you hard and intolerant and cruel. I thought you had become as hard as the metal star you wear, that no human heart could beat behind it. I commenced to look on you as a—a kind of monster. I was afraid of you. I thought there was no heart left in you. Don't you see, Dan, why I'm so ashamed now? The way you let Lobo go to save me last night, the way you've given your last penny to help out old Dave Wilton and his wife—if ever a man was human and fine and generous at heart it's you!"

He put his hand on her arm. "Cynthia, girl," he said, "I—"

"I suppose, Dan, now that you haven't any money left, you feel you can't ask me to marry you. So I'm asking you—will you marry me, Dan Marlin?"

He grinned suddenly. "Cynthia, you'll do to take along! Just as soon as I can save up a little money again—"

"Money!" scoffed Cynthia. "Don't be foolish. You've got your salary; I've got my little ranch. I mean will you marry me right now, tonight?"

Because of the way he gave his answer, neither of them said anything for several minutes after that.

●END

THEY WERE HORSES, NOT INDIANS

corporal and stood up at my wedding. By now, all on foot, the redskins came in and made peace. For this turn in the wars the Colonel got a raise in pay and a citation from Washington for his services to the nation. He framed the document and hung it to his wall above his feather bed.

Now's here what I always noticed about the Indians when they tamed the young calves of the buffalo. They breathed into the mouths of the calves and gave 'em something to eat. After that the buffalo calves would foller after them like as if the Indian was a female buffalo giving

milk.

So I in my moments of meditation figured that one out. A kiss—maybe, sort of. But beasties know you by your smell. When you breathe in their faces, they shore get your smell. If you give 'em a lump of sugar, then, and treat 'em decent, they'll always know you for friend. They'll foller you anywheres.

When I told that to Sunrise, she give me a look.

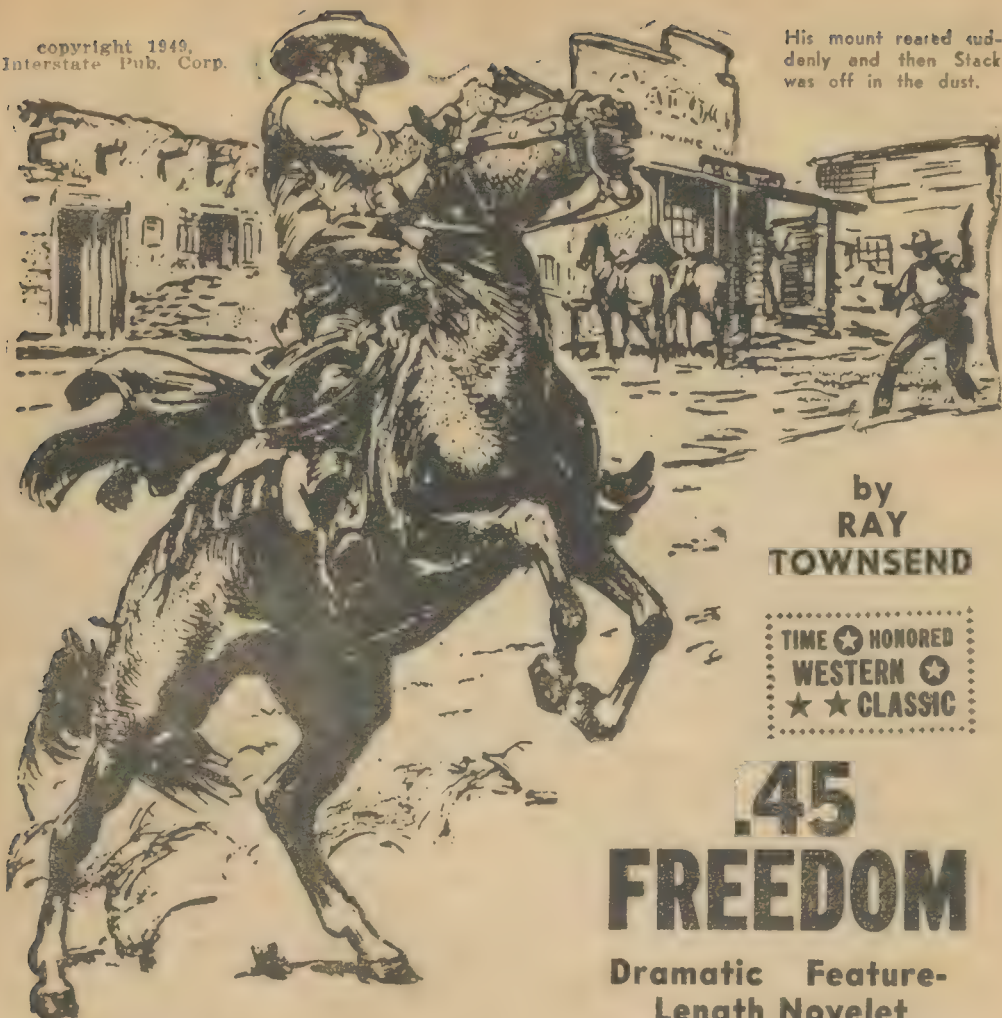
"Huh! Well, anyhow, don't forget the sugar."

So I give her the sugar, and boys, it works on women same as horses.

●END

(continued from page 66)

His mount reared suddenly and then Stack was off in the dust.



by
**RAY
TOWNSEND**

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN ★
★ ★ CLASSIC

45 FREEDOM

**Dramatic Feature-
Length Novelet**

**Even a doomed
dimtrail exile had
a right to die fighting,
Stack Benteen reckoned.
But where would he get the
gun — and where could he
get the guts?**

STACK BENTEEN grimaced, blinking through sleep-matted eyes as he explored the taste of his mouth with a furry tongue. He came upright on the edge of the bed, seeing the shabbiness of the room, frowning suddenly with the morning's stir of memory.

It had been the same old thing, then. Liquor. Poker. He moved across the room, splashing water into the

china bowl, soaking his head and face greedily. He'd lost the Defiance Mine to Luke Ferris. The knowledge was a heaviness building bitter overtones within him as he drew on his clothes and left the hotel.

He had forgotten the girl until he saw her move out of the stage office. She was dressed for travel, and little Tommy Gardner, her five-year-old son, was with her, running noisily across the walk to scramble up into the waiting Concord coach. It was in Stack Benteen to turn then, but she had seen him and he held his stride along the walk, coming up beneath her glance as she paused beside the stage.

"So you're leaving, Anne." He felt the hard search of her gaze on his face.

"What else, Stack? Would you have me stay and—wash dishes for a living, perhaps?"

"Uncle Stack!" The boy's voice was shrill from the coach window. "We're going to St. Louis. Don't you want to go to St. Louis with us, Uncle Stack?"

Anne Gardner's eyes came up, but there was no smile there for Stack Benteen. He moved across to look up at the boy's round, questioning features.

"Not this time, Tommy boy," he said. He studied the boy's dark-eyed seriousness, seeing the open forthrightness that had been Vince Gardner's, frowning now at the fleeting thought of Vince's death. "Maybe next time."

As Stack turned he heard the heavy step behind, recognizing the overly pompous tones of Judge Amos Crenshaw. The man had stopped before Anne Gardner, flourishing the old-fashioned beaver hat in an elaborate gesture.

"Ah, Mrs. Gardner. An extremely good morning to you, ma'am. But are you leaving our fair city so soon?"

"Do you think you left me much choice, Judge?" Anne's voice was without warmth.

"I've wanted to tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Gardner." Benteen laughed inwardly at the man's words. "Finding that your Christmas Tree mine was within the boundaries of Mr. Ferris' holdings was not my idea of pleasure. My decision yesterday was very distasteful to me. But the evidence, Mrs. Gardner..."

"I know, Judge." She turned to the coach. "The letter of the law."

Crenshaw paused, seemingly noticing Benteen for the first time. "Looks like Ferris is trying to gobble up the whole lode. Hear he took over your Defiance last night, Benteen."

"Stack!" Annie's glance was accusing upon his face. "You didn't!"

"The stage leaves in twenty minutes, Anne," he said. "It's a rough road. You'd best get what rest you can."

"But, Stack..."

"Words don't help, Anne." He studied the gentle, familiar lines of her face and for a moment something

akin to desperation moved within him. "We both know that."

"Uncle Stack, why won't you go with mommy and me to St. Louis?" Tears hovered in the boy's voice. "Don't you love us any more, Uncle Stack?"

Benteen paused, but the reassurance for Tommy Gardner was no longer in him. He turned abruptly past Amos Crenshaw and strode away before the store fronts of the town.

"But mommy, daddy went away and now Uncle Stack is going away. Why, mommy, why?"

WHY, MOMMY, why? The boy's words echoed the bitter emptiness of his thoughts as Stack laid his last silver dollar on the bar. He took his drink, seeing the blankness of Joe Gooden's glance as he moved along the inner side of the bar to the far end. He'd finished his second drink when the three men came in. As they swaggered across to the bar Stack recognized the slim darkness of Quirt Evans, mining super-intendant and right hand man to Luke Ferris.

"Well, boys, look who we got with us so early in the morning. Mr. Benteen, late owner of the Defiance Mine, no less!" Evans stood apart from the other men, glass in hand, enjoying his joke. "Mr. Benteen is a great man, boys. Takes a great man to lose a silver mine without battin' an eye—even a one-horse silver mine!"

The men's laughter came up, hoarse and belly-loud. Stack poured himself another drink.

"But you know what takes a greater man than that, boys?" Quirt demanded in mock seriousness. "Well sir, I'd say it takes a greater man to stand by and watch his friend's wife become a widow, see her get fleeced out of her own mine and then come down real gentleman-like to tell her goodbye! Yes sir, that really takes a great man!"

Stack Benteen stood beneath the laughter in the saloon, his eyes hard on the amber glint of liquor in the glass before him.

"Yes sir," Evans said again, "it

sure must take a lot of good liquor to make a man as great as that!"

But words burned in sudden clarity on Stack's mind, coming home in abrupt, vital realization: *fleece*d out of her own mine! He looked up then, seeing the low strapped gun on Evans' thigh, crossing slowly to face the man where he stood. He knew Quirt Evans, knew that he would use the gun. But it was no longer important and nothing mattered except the words the man had used.

"Fleece'd, did you say, Quirt?"

The man's laugh was a slap in the face. "Get out, you cheap drunk!" But sheer, deadly hatred swelled in Benteen's throat and he moved forward, starting his reach for the man.

"Don't do it, boys!"

From the corner of his eye Stack caught Joe Gooden's movement behind the bar, the sawed-off, double-barrel pointing ominously across the counter at the other two men as they hesitated, hands clutching gingerly at the butts of their sixes.

"He's not armed and if there's any murder done in my place, I'll be the boy to do it!"

Stack watched the men grow still, saw calculation narrow in Quirt Evans' black eyes. He moved then, jerking a bit to the right as his left arrowed out, catching Evans hard in the throat. The man's gunhand clawed up in reflex and Stack hit him again, along the temple. The slim man wavered beneath the power of the blows and Benteen stepped in, marking the man's face deliberately, following as he fell, smashing flesh and bone in an orgy of sudden, released hatred.

"Ease off, lad! You'll kill him!"

He was holding the fallen man by the hair of his head, without realization. The head hit the floor in lifeless thudding sound as he straightened, taking his eyes from the broken, bloody pulp that had been Quirt Evans' face. He looked around the room slowly, feeling the heaving motion of his chest, the sudden, weak trembling behind his knees.

One of Ferris' men spoke, his voice quiet in awed sincerity. "I'd hate to be in your shoes, Benteen. Or yours,

Joe. When Ferris hears about this..."

"This is my layout!" Joe Gooden stood straight-lipped behind the double barreled gun. "I side with no man, but when you're in my house you play according to my rules!"

But Stack Benteen had turned and was gone. The stage coach was still standing before the office as he moved through the morning's crowd. As he approached, he saw the man through a shift in the traffic, standing easily and almost gracefully before the waiting coach. He was expensively dressed, in a manner more befitting an eastern country estate than a raw Nevada mining town. As he came up Benteen faced the man, his eyes careful upon the smooth shaven features, the faintly beaked nose, the startling flat blue eyes of Luke Ferris.

"Ah, Benteen." There was amusement in Ferris' tone. "Raise another stake yet? Or are you planning to accompany the lady back to the States?"

But there was no patience in Benteen. "You fixed the claim boundaries on the Christmas Tree, Ferris," he said flatly. "Crenshaw's decision is no good!"

"Stack, please..." Anne Gardner's voice came small from the coach.

"I've tolerated a lot from you, Benteen." Ferris turned thin. "Perhaps too much!"

Benteen stepped closer. "Mrs. Gardner is not leaving Storeyville, Ferris! The Christmas Tree is going to remain in her possession until the case can be reviewed by a circuit court. The Christmas Tree is going to be worked until that time. I'm telling you these things, understand?"

"For once you're right, Benteen. The Christmas Tree will be worked. But my men are going to do the working! The first man not under my orders who steps foot on the claim will die!" The man smiled thinly at Benteen, turning again to the girl.

"I advise you strongly to proceed as you've planned, Mrs. Gardner. As much as I dislike using force where a lady is concerned, you'll find that listening to this man may bring you much grief!" The man's faint nod

came with the formality of a bow. He turned then, ignoring Benteen as he moved away through the crowd.

STACK was strongly aware of the girl's glance as he brought the suitcases into the room. She had discarded her travelling cloak and heavy bonnet, revealing the luxury of waving auburn hair and the slender, feminine appeal of her figure in the dark blue dress she wore.

"Stack." Her voice held no defenses, nor reproach. "Why? Tell me."

"Mommy, is Uncle Stack going to come live with us now? Is he, mommy?" Tommy tugged at his mother's skirt as she looked at Benteen.

"Why, Anne?" He put the suitcases in a corner, repeating her question blankly. Why had he forced her to stay? Because of a few chance words he'd heard in a saloon? But, deep inside, hadn't he already known that Anne Gardner had been cheated of her mine? Yes, and just the same as he knew that Vince Gardner's death had been no accident? But where were the words that could give reason or purpose to the last five years? Cheap drunk, Evans had called him. And he was right. Laughter made a bitter sound in his mind.

"I can't tell you why, Anne." His eyes avoided her look. "Except that you can't get away from a thing by running."

She frowned. "What is it, Stack?"

He tried a grin. "I guess a man just gets to letting things slide. And sometimes they slide further than he thinks."

"But this, Stack. Mr. Ferris. Are you sure? Judge Crenshaw's reputation has never been questioned. Even Vince always trusted the Judge."

He told her then what had happened in the saloon, warning her to stay in the hotel as he left the room. As he went down the stairs to the street, determination moved in Stack and it was as though an actual, physical weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He was remembering the barroom brawl in which Vince Gardner had been killed three months before. He'd trailed the man who'd done the knifing, of course. But it

was a dry trail and he'd been glad to forget it when he'd got back to the town and its liquor. Always the sweet, numbing, soothing, forgetful liquor. But now the wonder and beguining hope he had seen in Anne's eyes moved strong in his thoughts, and his stride quickened as he crossed through the street's traffic.

Judge Amos Crenshaw paused, pen in hand, as he looked up from his desk at the man in the doorway. Benteen moved inside, the small office increasing the width of his shoulders, the domination of his presence, as he faced the white haired man.

"Ah, Benteen. What can I do for you, boy?"

"I want to know about the Christmas Tree deal, Crenshaw."

"Deal? Look here, Benteen, evidence as presented before me in a duly appointed court of law. That the Christmas Tree mine had been erroneously located on land later found to be within the boundaries of Mr. Ferris' Sazerac claim was a proven point in that evidence!"

Benteen reached forward, bunching the man's shirt-front in a huge fist. Crenshaw's eyes widened in the heaviness of his face.

"Tell me, Crenshaw!"

But instead of fear, a sly calmness spread slowly over the man's face. Shrewdness narrowed the black points of his eyes and for a moment Benteen felt in the man's passive resistance something that might prove more powerful than force itself.

"All right, Benteen, I'll tell you." The man's voice was smooth. "What's the difference what a drunken bum hears—especially when he only has a few hours to live anyway!"

"Never mind the opinions—talk!"

"You're right for once, Benteen. The records were changed. Yes, and I changed them. But your knowing will do no good. You could choke the life out of me and I'd die swearing you lied! You're a dead man anyway, Benteen! It makes no difference! The Christmas Tree belongs to Ferris now!"

Watching the man, Stack sensed an unreality, something that might have been a touch of hysteria working beneath the surface. Crenshaw was talk-

ing too much and too fast. His eyes glittered abnormally.

"What do you get out of this, Crenshaw?" he asked softly.

The man laughed. Shrilly. An unexpected sound from the heavy depths of his body.

"More than money! More than silver! More than a drunken tramp like you could ever realize! Freedom, Benteen! Freedom! Do you understand?" Amos Crenshaw came forward in his chair, straightening, his eyes on Stack's face and yet beyond.

"Look at me! Judge Amos Crenshaw! A staunch member of the board of jurisprudence. An honorable man! Respected! You'd never suspect that for years I've walked in hourly dread—in the fear that at any moment I might be stripped of honor, robbed of the respect of my fellow men, thrown behind prison bars! Fear! Every living moment, fear! And this, because of the knowledge of one man!"

"Ferris."

"Yes, Ferris! And I've been an honorable man, Benteen. In every action since that day nine years ago! But what does it matter? Now, with one small act, one small altering of the county records, I'm free again! Free, do you hear me? Do you think the threats of a man like you could make me deny myself this freedom?" His hand crashed upon the desk.

But slowly he relaxed, his eyes coming into focus upon Benteen's face, as though seeing him for the first time. "But this will do you no good. You're a dead man, Benteen. Luke Ferris is too big. Leave me. Go out, buy a gun. Maybe you can kill him before his men get you. Even a drunk has a right to die fighting, I guess. I can't help you."

The man slumped in his chair, his chin sinking from sight in the soft folds of flesh about his collar, heavy lids drooping upon his eyes. Benteen felt the finality of the gesture, turning to leave the room. But, too, there was a feeling of compassion for the judge. Luke Ferris, he knew, would never relinquish the hold he had on the man.

A gun. Benteen had crossed the street before remembering that he'd

left his last dollar on Joe Gooden's mahogany bar. He turned in front of Laughton's store, going down the length of the street to Pop Newton's livery stable. The whiskered little liveryman nodded briefly as he moved into the deep shadow of the rearmost stalls in the barn.

"It'd be my skin if they ever find out I'd helped you, boy." The wiry old man shook his head slowly beneath Stack's glance. "Two of Ferris' men were here not twenty minutes ago. No horse, they said." He looked up. "They ain't aiming to get you leave town, Stack."

Benteen nodded.

"I just let Ed Rinker have two mares. Long-legged beauties. Good stock. He allowed as they might be standing around that little brush corral back of his shack tonight—saddled." The little man rummaged through loose hay in the empty stall. He brought out a canvas-wrapped bundle about a foot long, handing it to Benteen quickly. "Don't know where this thing come from, but it ain't mine."

Stack felt the weight of the pistol in his hands, slipped it beneath his waistband carefully.

"Get the gal and her kid out of town, boy. And go with her. Don't be a danged fool—like Vince Gardner was!" The man was gone, then, sidling away to the front of the barn on spindly, bowed legs.

Benteen left the stable by the rear, circling around to come out on the street several buildings away. He studied the shifting crowd before he stepped out, saw none of Ferris' men.

Don't be a fool... get the gal and her kid out... The words moved through Stack's mind as he strode toward the Fargo office. What had Newton actually heard? Ferris wouldn't dare lay a hand on the girl... He lengthened his stride suddenly, urgency mounting with the pound of his pulse.

Ferris had overlooked the telegraph office. Stack wired his message to Austin, demanding an appeal of Judge Crenshaw's decision, receiving an affirmation of receipt of the message before turning in the direction of the hotel. She was still in the room.

Young Tommy launched a running attack of questions, pulling at the frayed edges of the worn sheepskin coat Stack wore.

"I wired Judge Cox at Austin, in your name," he told the girl. "It'll take time, Anne, but you'll get title on the Christmas Tree."

Anne Gardner's expression clouded. "But, Stack, how do we know? It seems so—so futile."

He told her of his interview with Amos Crenshaw, seeing disbelief, then wonder move into her glance.

"But why don't we go to Sheriff Reed? If this is true it's his job to investigate!"

"Anne, we both know better than that. Reed is Ferris' man from the ground up."

"But if Judge Crenshaw confessed to you the way he did..."

"The tortures of hell would never make him admit it."

The girl came out of her chair, crossing to look idly out the window. Benteen studied the profile of her features against the light and it came to him how alone she was—and how young. She turned then, and he read the uncertainty that lay within her.

"If only Vince..."

"I know, Anne," he said. "It's a hard thing on a woman." He searched for words. "But I'd like to do this thing for you."

She looked at him. "Stack—I don't know."

It was there then, between them. But he had to say it.

"Is it the liquor, Anne?"

But color mounted in the paleness of her face and he needed no answer. And talk was no good. How could he tell this girl of Marion? Marion, the small-boned blonde girl who had been his wife and had died in the blackness of a night five years ago. The pangs of childbirth had wrung their screams before she'd gone, taking their son; screams he still heard on nights when the whiskey had flowed and then ran short. No, he couldn't tell her these things but the liquor and the failures and the uselessness were there and not to be denied. Now, standing there, he wanted the trust of this woman, needed it—and knew he did not deserve it.

"The miners," he said. "Vince was trying to get them together to build their own stamp mill. Would any of them..."

"You know how the men are, Stack. They'd be willing to do what they could, I suppose. But bucking Luke Ferris is no little thing in White Pine Canyon. Each one of them would remember Vince and know that the same thing could happen to him."

"Anne." Decision moved in Stack's voice. "You've got to let me help you! When you see Ferris tell him that you've hired me to run the Christmas Tree!"

The big man stood there, seeing his reflection in the girl's eyes, feeling the hesitation that was in her. And it was more, suddenly, than Anne's opinion that mattered. He felt the boy at his side and the faith and confidence of the tiny hand touching his own. Yes, he thought, it was more; it was more than money, or a mine, or a woman and her son, even. It was himself, his own respect he needed. It was for this he needed her faith, and it was in him in moving, relentless will that she grant it.

The depth of her gaze clouded and she wavered before him. "Stack..."

But the hall door opened suddenly, slamming back against the wall, and the bandaged, beaten face of Quirt Evans glowered as he came in behind the up-raised threat of a forty-five. The two men who had been with him earlier came in, fanning away from the door. Luke Ferris was there, finally, the paleness of his smoothly shaven face smiling faintly in appreciation of the moment.

"My most humble apologies, Mrs. Gardner, for breaking in on you like this. But there are certain circumstances that demand my being in control of the situation."

"Move, Benteen! Just once!" Evans' voice came low in the room and Stack felt the bitter hatred beneath the words. He said nothing, glancing at Anne's face, seeing the upward lift of her chin as she spoke.

"I'm appealing Judge Crenshaw's decision Mr. Ferris. Judge Cox will be in Storeyville on Circuit Court soon. Until that time I have hired Mr.

Benteen to operate the Christmas Tree."

Ferris coughed without losing the smile. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Gardner, but I find Judge Crenshaw's decision quite satisfactory. I'm afraid that I shall have to insist you leave as you had planned. There will be another stage tomorrow morning. I intend personally to see that you are on it!"

"Maybe you didn't hear what the lady said, Ferris!" Benteen stepped forward, facing the man. "I'm running the Christmas Tree and nobody's taking the stage!"

"Stack, please!"

The girl's voice turned Benteen's glance and he caught himself a moment too late. Evans had stepped forward as he turned to the girl and now, sensing the man's intent, Stack came back, swinging low, but taking the wicked cutting force of Quirt's down-swung weapon along the side of the head. Light flared before his eyes and the world rocked crazily, but somehow he managed to keep his feet. He heard voices, but could distinguish no words and was wondering faintly why the man didn't strike again when he realized that he was not standing, after all, but was on his hands and knees staring at close range at the intricate pattern of the rug on the floor. He shook his head vaguely.

"There is nothing you can do that will force me to leave Storeyville, Mr. Ferris." The girl's words finally fell into sequence in Stack's mind, but still he could not straighten against the swirling dizziness that held him. "The Christmas Tree is my legal property and I can prove it in court. If necessary, I can demand a United States Marshal to back the findings of the court. I can take this to the territorial governor, Mr. Ferris, and in the end you will lose!"

Quirt Evans laughed shortly, but Luke Ferris was silent, waiting.

"But I will get on the stage and go to St. Louis and forget the appeal on one condition!"

Ferris's smile came then, crookedly, and he nodded at the man on the floor without taking his eyes from the girl's face. "Benteen." The sound was filled with contempt.

"Yes."

THE MEN were gone when the room finally cleared before his eyes. She was beside him on the couch, dressing the open cut that had been laid bare with the blow. He had heard the words that had passed, had been unable to stop them. He avoided her eyes now and the feeling of anger and of shame twisted in his stomach and brought redness into his neck and ears. When she spoke, finally, they disagreed violently on her promise to the man.

"But I gave my word, Stack," she told him. "There's nothing else we can do!"

When the dressing was finished he came to his feet, crossing the room without smiling. "The Christmas Tree is a rich mine, Anne. It belongs to you."

"They'll kill you." She spoke without passion, as though in certain knowledge. "Just like they did Vince. Don't you think I've had enough of death, Stack?"

He looked at her from the door.

"Stack! I warn you I'm leaving in the morning as I promised!"

He went out then, without speaking further, knowing the uselessness of it, and feeling the run of bitterness as something akin to hate in the innermost depths of his being.

"Benteen!"

Stack hesitated at the edge of the walk. Finally, across the street in the livery stable, he made out the beckoning form of Pop Newton. The old man was standing half shielded by one of the front stalls and was motioning frantically in some fashion impossible to understand. Stack idled across further down and cut out around back, not wanting to get the little man in trouble if he could help it. In the shadow of the same stall he'd been in earlier, he made out the frowning, worried expression of the oldster's face.

"Don't want none of them coyotes spotting us together, could I help it," he said, urging Stack deeper into the barn. "First, boy, what d'you think of Vince Gardner's idee of all the boys in White Pine Canyon chipping in and setting up their own stamp mill?"

Benteen nodded, wondering.

"Figured you would. Ed Rinker and some of the rest been thinking

things over. They been getting a pretty rough deal, with Luke Ferris taking fifty per cent of the crude bullion for refining costs in that mill of his. But most of the diggings have been paying so good they just kind of strung along. Till this morning, that is."

"What happened?"

"Last night some of the boys was talking over the situation. Evans heard them. Swore the Sazerac would run every man outa the Canyon that had anything to do with the idea! And now, only an hour ago, Ed Rinker and old Sut Jensen of the Three Aces claim was chewin' the fat over at Gooden's when three of Ferris' men started a ruckus and knifed Sut! Ferris and Evans showed. Sut's dead. They backed the play!"

Benteen was silent, considering.

"Well, Ed and the boys all heard about you whippin' Quirt Evans this morning and—well, Stack, they figure you're the boy they need!"

The thing fell together then, dovetailing in Stack's mind. It was better than he could have hoped for and enthusiasm crowded up against the emptiness that had been in him.

"Rinker and a couple of the lads is waiting out at his place now. What say we go out and..."

But the little man's voice cut off in mid-sentence, his mouth snapping shut as his eyes fixed on the front of the barn beyond Benteen. Turning, Stack found himself facing Luke Ferris and Quirt Evans. As he watched, four more men came in from the rear. Evans stepped close to Benteen, gun drawn, leering. Luke Ferris spoke softly.

"You're keeping bad company, Pop. All right, Benteen, let's go!"

"It won't be so easy this time, hombre!" Quirt's broken mouth twisted in what might have been a smile.

The thing was plain before Benteen. The cards were short, the deck cold. But rebellion came up, uncontrollably. He couldn't let it go. He made his move, quick and low, jabbing out for Evans, trying for a cover hold.

It failed, as logic had told him it would. Light exploded again inside his brain, but before the pain had ac-

tually registered, darkness came and was complete in overwhelming oblivion.

THE ROOM had a familiar feel as he opened his eyes: The crude rafters overhead, dim in the light of a lantern beyond; the narrow bunk upon which he lay. It came to him then that he was in his own shanty; the log shack he had built when he'd first located the Defiance. Defiance! Ha! He laughed inside without humor at the sound of the name. But men's voices came from beyond the line of his vision and as he identified the sounds, memory welled back.

"Keep him here until morning." There was dismissal in Ferris' voice. "And I warn you, Quirt, I don't want him marked up any more than he is right now when that stage pulls out in the morning! The girl made her deal and she could give us plenty of trouble later if she goes back on it now! After that he's all yours!"

Stack recognized the sound of the door. He heard Ferris bellow Crenshaw's name and twisted his head against a sharp, jabbing pain in time to see the heavy bodied judge enter the room and slump into a chair before the table.

"I thought I told you..."

"This place wasn't such a good idea, Luke," the judge said. "And maybe some other things weren't so good either."

Benteen's head was clearing as he watched the men from beneath narrowed lids. He sensed their hesitation, their waiting upon the judge's words. Crenshaw spoke without looking up.

"Rinker and Newton, maybe twenty others, are on their way up the Canyon!"

"Why, you dirty..." Quirt Evans stepped forward, reaching for the man.

"Tell him, judge!" Three pairs of eyes came around as Stack Benteen raised himself upon the bunk. He spoke rapidly, taking full advantage of the surprise he'd created. "Tell him it's no good and that you know it's no good! Nothing is worth the fear and the hiding, judge, not even life! And Ferris will never give you freedom! Look at him! Does he look

the kind of man to throw away an advantage? He'll bleed you with fear and make you toe the line every day of your life! Tell him!"

But gunfire burst suddenly through the night beyond the shack, freezing the men inside. Quirt Evans swore, crashing sudden darkness into the room with a savage sweep of his gun barrel.

"Down, judge!" Stack yelled hoarsely as he threw himself to the floor and away from the bunk. A chair scraped and the table went over. Quirt Evans' forty-five blasted in unison with the roar of a derringer in Ferris' hand. Men moved beneath the lighting flash of the guns and the door smashed open to admit the hammer of firing beyond.

There were voices in the night and the snorting, nervous play of horses. Benteen was outside then, sensing Ferris' men and, beyond, the high upraised quality of Pop Newton's voice. But Ferris and Evans had gone into the dark.

He was into the town ahead of Rinker and the other men. But Ferris was there, he knew, and Evans. The street lay unnaturally empty, dead beneath the outflaming light of lined store fronts. His mount reared suddenly, screaming as the sharp, clean bark of a carbine slapped the air. Stack went into the dust, sidling in a bent run for cover. The shot had come from the narrow balcony fronting the hotel building.

Hoofbeats made a muffled tattoo at the head of the street as Benteen circled between buildings, coming against the rear of the hotel. Gunfire came up again, sounding more distant as he slipped inside the building. He moved along the lower hallway, gaining the upper floor.

"He's got Tommy, Stack! Ferris has got Tommy!"

Ten mules kicked into Benteen's left shoulder, spinning him around, smashing him against the wall.

"I got him!" Quirt's voice came up in a sheer reflex of triumph against the girl's scream. But as Stack came back, steadying himself against the wall, the other man coughed, stag-

gered forward as he fell full length upon his face. Quirt Evans had been shot before he spoke, the running tension of his nerves carrying a full minute before death.

And now, as Stack swayed against the wall, the door at the end of the passage opened and Luke Ferris was there before him, gun in hand. Stack fired automatically, once, twice, not seeing the shock of surprise, the disbelief upon the smooth face of the man, nor knowing the trap that Evans' words had laid for Ferris, there beyond the door. He reached again for support as Ferris went down, feeling the well of blackness grow, giving way to tiredness.

"No, Mrs. Gardner, I've made up my mind. I've done you an injustice and I intend to see it undone. I'm leaving for Austin tomorrow. And I assure you that what little retribution the courts deem just for me will be as nothing compared to what I've already suffered these last nine years." Judge Amos Crenshaw, his right arm swathed in a muslin sling, refused to listen further to the girl's protests.

"Mommy," Tommy Gardner pulled anxiously at his mother's skirt. "Hurry! Uncle Stack's awake! Can we ask him now, mommy?" But the boy ran ahead without answer into the room where Benteen lay propped against white pillows. "Uncle Stack, mommy said we don't have to go to St. Louis if you'll take care of us like daddy did before he had to go away. Will you, Uncle Stack?"

Benteen returned the boy's serious gaze. "I don't know, Tommy," he said. "Your daddy took awful good care of you."

"Aw, I bet you could if you wanted, Uncle Stack."

The man looked up at the boy's mother as she came into the room. He spoke without smiling. "Do you thing I could, Anne—if I wanted?"

She was beside the bed then, her face coming down to him.

"Yes," she said softly. "I think you could, Stack—if you wanted."

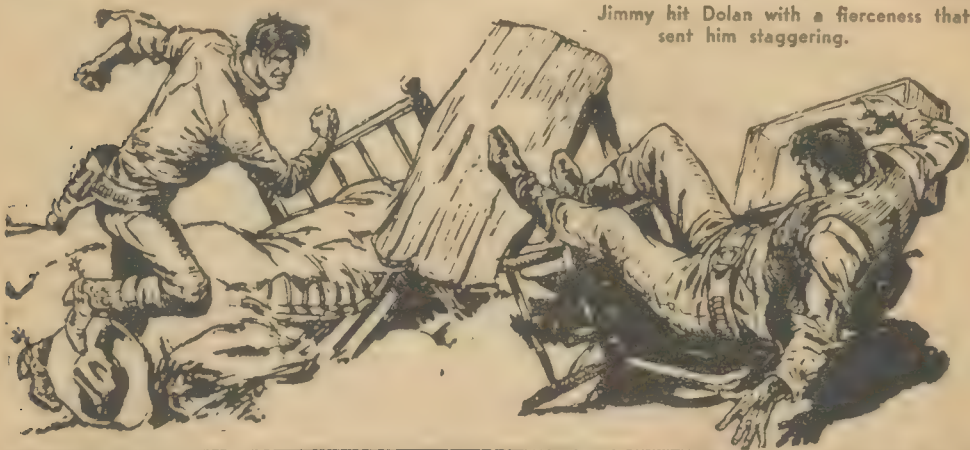
THE SIXGUNS HELL COULDN'T SILENCE

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN ★
★ ★ CLASSIC

THE STORM was in the air when Jimmy Lister turned in for the night, but it did not break in its full fury until around

and a whole ham hung from the cabin rafters.

There was additional comfort in the knowledge that the log stable was



Jimmy hit Dolan with a fierceness that sent him staggering.

What made a coward, Jimmy Lister asked himself. A man who feared an outlaw bronc, or one who would leave helpless cattle die in a blizzard?

midnight. The thunder of the tempest in the timber woke Jimmy, and he lay there in his bunk listening to the crash of the elements and the gush of rain from the cabin roof. Within an hour the first tumult of the wind steadied to a thin, humming wail and the rain stopped. It grew colder and Jimmy knew that outside the snow was beginning to pile up.

There was a certain warm comfort in the knowledge that the cabin would stand as long as the earth under it stayed put, for Jimmy had built the cabin himself, slowly, laboriously, lovingly, through the long, hazy autumn days. Every log in it was sound and true and the split shakes which made the roof were double thickness. The lean-to shed on the south side of the cabin was stuffed full of dry wood and under the low porch outside the door a whole venison was hung up to freeze. Besides which, the flour barrel was full, the grocery shelf well stacked and there was a side of bacon

warm and tight, with a loft full of dry wild hay. So let the blizzard blow and let the snow pile up. He and Blaze, his bald faced Nevada horse, were set to see it through in comfort and plenty.

Yet, despite these cheerful facts, Jimmy grew restless as he lay there, for his thoughts winged across the frigid night to the north slope of Baldy, where a portion of Buck Whitton's summer herd still lingered on. At least, the cattle had been in the aspen swamps over there four days ago. Jimmy knew that, because he had seen them there and had gone to the trouble of riding down to Whitton's line camp cabin at Dead Man to warn Hunk Dolan, Whitton's line camp rider, that he'd better get the stock out of there before the first blizzard struck.

And all he got for his trouble was a surly cursing out and a renewal of the taunt that had driven him from Buck Whitton's Quarter Circle W outfit. A yellow little coward, was

what Dolan had called him, after which Dolan had told him to mind his damned business and not try and give better men advice. Dolan was half drunk and through the open door Jimmy had seen a whiskey jug on the table. Which added up to almost a dead certainty that Dolan hadn't got that jag of stock off of Baldy. Which added up to still another certainty. That jag of cattle were doomed.

Those aspen swamps on Baldy's north face were sweet summer range, but a death trap for cattle caught there in a blizzard. For the storm would harry the cattle off the open points and down into the narrow gulches where the stunted aspens grew thick and twisted. And here the snow would drift and pack and blanket the helpless animals, climbing first to their knees, then to their bellies, then up their flanks and sides until they were unable to move. And when the blizzard tailed off into the inevitable freeze, that would be the end.

Well, it was none of his business, thought Jimmy. They were Quarter Circle W cattle and he didn't owe a damned thing to Buck Whitton, except maybe a punch on the nose. Hadn't Whitton tied the can to him last spring, agreeing with his outfit that Jimmy Lister was a yellow little coward?

Jimmy writhed in his blankets at the memory. There had been a horse, a big, black, warped brain devil of a horse, the kind of an outlaw that went after a man he had thrown with smashing, pawing hoofs. And Jimmy had refused to try and ride the brute, though he was the best twister in the outfit.

Maybe it had looked like cowardice. But none of that jeering Quarter Circle W crew could understand the memory which dogged Jimmy Lister—the memory of Tex Lear.

Bosom pals, Jimmy and Tex had been traveling the rodeo trail together, sharing their blankets and their last dollar together. And then one day Tex had drawn just such an outlaw as that big, black devil. A man killer. The kind that wasn't content with dusting a rider's shirt, but which went after that rider, screaming and pawing.

And Tex, with his cheerful grin,

his gentle drawl had been thrown that day, and died under the mad hoofs of the outlaw, despite all the pickup riders could do about it.

THAT TERRIBLE day had done something to Jimmy Lister. Three full years ago it had happened, yet even now of nights there were times when Jimmy would awaken sweat drenched, with the demoniac screaming of that man killer in his ears and the picture before his eyes of Tex Lear rolling in the dust, the life being smashed and pounded out of him under those flailing, merciless hoofs.

No, Buck Whitton and his crew didn't know about that, nor would they have understood had he tried to explain. And so they had tagged him as a yellow coward and Whitton had fired him.

Maybe it was just as well. For now he had settled on this quarter section above Wild Horse Meadows, had built his cabin and was snug set for the winter. Next spring he would rustle a job with some outfit down in the plains country, save his money and get together a few head of cattle. Then someday, maybe, he thought drowsily, he'd be as big a man, or maybe bigger, than Buck Whitton in the cattle game. One thing was certain. He was all through with the rodeo game, or trying to fork wild bronses. He couldn't have made a go of it, with the ghost of Tex Lear riding at his shoulder.

Jimmy pulled the blankets over his sandy, tousled head, snugged deeper into the warm folds. But sleep wouldn't come. For he was thinking of those cattle again, up there in the aspen swamps on north Baldy. Poor, dumb, helpless devils, doomed to a freezing death because the drunken whelp of a Hunk Dolan wouldn't leave his whiskey jug long enough to get them out of the aspens and around into the timber on Baldy's south slope.

Of course, Dolan would have to account to Buck Whitton. Whitton would certainly fire him and maybe give him a damned good licking to boot. But that wouldn't save those cattle.

Jimmy Lister loved honest cattle,

like he loved an honest horse. Like good old Blaze, for instance. To Jimmy, it was the top of a man's life to see a jag of fat, husky white faces, browsing in contentment across some chunk of range, or resting in the shade at mid-day, or trailing off in leisurely single file in the cool purple of evening on the way to water. When the calves, frisky, sturdy little white faced bummers, would dart away from the sides of their slow striding mothers in charges of mock ferocity at each other and perhaps now and then get together in infant battle, when baby bovine eyes would roll awesomely and wooly heads would bump and thump harmlessly. Yeah, life around cattle was a good life—the only life for Jimmy Lister.

The whine of the wind had a thin, pinched, remorseless sound to it. And a jab of cold reached clear to Jimmy's spine, despite the covering of wool blankets.

There would be some calves with those Quarter Circle W cattle up on north Baldy. They would be the first to go under, poor little devils. The snow would bog them quick. And next spring, when the warm sun got to work and the snow melted away, the coyotes and the timber wolves would feast. And then the black and gruesome buzzards settle down to the few remnants.

Damn Hunk Dolan anyhow, the dirty, drunken whelp! Just one day of effort before this storm broke would have had all these cattle safely down into the sheltering tember. And what made a real coward? A man who refused to risk his neck through a bravado attempt to ride a killer outlaw, or a man who betrayed the trust of his boss and left a jag of helpless cattle to die in a blizzard.

Jimmy tumbled restlessly and the blankets fell away from his face. He blinked as he realized the cabin wasn't as dark as before. Why, it was pale daylight, breaking through the storm! He'd been hours with his thoughts, worrying about those cussed cattle!

Well, he was a fool to do that. Not his cattle, not his responsibility. And Buck Whitton's loss. Whitton wouldn't know about the predicament of the cattle, of course. He'd figure that Hunk Dolan would have read the

weather, known what was coming and got the stock down into the timber. But Dolan had let Whitton down. And Whitton would have Dolan's ears for it, when he found out. Well, that would be between the two of them. Only those poor, snow bound, four footed devils would die, the snow choking their bewildered complaint in their throats...!

Jimmy Lister cursed and threw the blankets aside. There was only one thing to do. He'd known it from the first. It had been in the back of his mind all the time and had ridden him into the open, despite all the excuses he had thought up.

SHIVERING he climbed into his clothes. A handful of pitch pine kindling and a sputtering match and the flames began to roar up the chimney of the little cabin stove. Jimmy stacked the fire box full and the stove began to creak with heat. Jimmy had to break the ice on the water bucket just inside the door before he could fill the coffee pot. And he had to thaw the side of bacon before he could slice it.

Half an hour later, stuffed with every mouthful of food he could hold and muffled to clumsiness in clothes and fleece lined jacket, he pushed open the cabin door and stepped out.

The wind had let up somewhat, but the snow was falling steadily, silent and white and beautiful. But with a still remorselessness. There was a foot and half of it on the level just beyond the shelter of the porch. Which meant that up on Baldy it would be bad, very bad. A fine day to get lost and to freeze to death. But any fool as big as he was, ought to freeze. Jimmy lowered his head against the white curtain and ploughed for the log stable.

It hadn't been too bad coming up around Baldy through the timber. But when the timber ran out and the aspen swamps began, Jimmy Lister knew he had bought himself a job. Even Blaze figured his master was loco, for the big, powerful horse seemed to shake his intelligent head as though in negation of what lay ahead and to try and turn back to the shelter of the timber. But Jimmy sent him out into it, and

Blaze, after that first hesitation, breasted the drifts sturdily.

Inside of three hundred yards Jimmy found the first cattle. They were huddled in a gulch, humped and apathetic and waiting for the end. Jimmy got around them and put the pressure on them. At first they refused to move, but Jimmy picked the stoniest of the lot, a bulky steer and went to work with a clubbed rope end. Yipping and yelling and flailing away with the rope, he finally managed to break the steer loose and start it around the slope toward the timber. The other cattle in the group followed the steer, which broke a floundering trail through the drifts and stunted aspen. And Jimmy kept the pressure on them until they filed into the timber. Here they would be safe, for without the heavy drifts to block their way they would drift down the mountain and the lower they got the lighter the snow would be. Jimmy counted seventeen in that first bunch.

Two gulches over from where the first had been, he found another bunch, and at first he despaired doing anything with them. The gulch was narrow and rocky and blocked up on the lower side by a pile of snow mounded boulders. This boulder pile had offered a break from the wind and the cattle had packed in as close as they could get to it. And then the snow had drifted in deep above them, trapping them completely.

Rope's end and yelling were not enough. Jimmy sent Blaze to plunging against the drift above, beating some semblance of a way out through it, then tried the rope end again. It wouldn't work and he was near to despair when he realized that this, in freshet time had been a narrow water course and that a pile of dead aspen limbs had mounded under the lean of the boulders.

He had to leave his saddle and climb right down among the cattle to do what he intended. They pressed in on him on all sides and the animal smell of them was strong. But in the heart of the driftwood pile, Jimmy found some that was dry and with half frozen, fumbling fingers which wasted match after match, he finally got a fire started.

The wind, licking through a crevice

of the rocks, built the blaze up rapidly and Jimmy climbed out, brushed the snow from his saddle and started the rope end treatment again. It was the flaming driftwood which finally got results. The cattle closest to the rock fought back away from the leaping flames and the pressure of their movement finally made the outer animals move. One by one they broke through the drift above and Jimmy sent them curving around the slope into the teeth of the wind to the haven of the timber. Fourteen in that bunch.

Jimmy Lister lost all count of time. The only reason he did not lose all sense of direction was because of the slope of the mountain side and the direction of the cutting, freezing wind. Back in the timber he had thought the wind to be letting up somewhat. But out here in the scrub aspen swamps, with nothing to stop it, the wind was a cruel, savage, bitter force. It drove the sheeted snow before it until the frozen particles had the biting sting of whipping sand. And always the drifts mounted higher and higher.

A HORSE with less bottom and heart than Blaze would have given out long before the job was half done. A man of less wiry, dogged tenacity than Jimmy Lister would have called it quits with the first two score of cattle safely in the timber. But Jimmy and his horse went on and on. They fought wind and snow and blank horizons. They fought piled drifts and the clutching, tangled stunted aspen growth beneath the snow. They fought cold and weariness and gaunting hunger. And they got cattle into the timber.

As the vicious hours wore on the storm began to pick up in intensity, as though angry at the puny, dogged efforts of one man and one horse which were robbing it of its anticipated victims. The wind wailed and snarled in a solid freezing sheet. And only the physical efforts he put forth in harrying and fighting the numbed and cold stupified cattle into movement kept Jimmy from freezing.

There were cattle already down. Some were dead. Some were dying. But those who had enough left, Jimmy got up on their feet and moving,

somehow. Some he dragged ruthlessly on the end of his lariat. Some he tailed up, some he whipped savagely with his rope end, necessary brutality to keep them from a more definite fate.

And there were calves, which he hoisted to his saddle and carried in his arms. Back and forth—back and forth, through that blinding, suffocating, freezing white world. Had the wind been from the other direction it would have been far simpler. In fact, the cattle would never have stayed in the aspen swamps had the wind been different. But they wanted to drift before the wind and that way was death, sure and certain. And even when he had cattle up and moving, they still wanted to drift before the wind and it was Jimmy's task to head them into it instead, and over and around to where the timber offered its moaning shelter.

It was done at last. He had reached the far edge of the aspen swamps, beyond which lay only barren rock and bottomless drifts. Anything which the wind had been able to drive beyond this point was past all aid.

Jimmy had tried to keep hazy count of what he had gotten to shelter. He was fairly accurate up to a hundred. But beyond that it all ran away into meaningless confusion. And he didn't care any more. He was done—all in—swaying in the saddle with drugged, numbed weariness. And Blaze, good old Blaze, was stumbling and floundering, ready to go down and stay there.

Jimmy turned his back on the open shale slides, bowed his head into the wind for the final time and started Blaze on a final trip across the swamps into the fury of the wind. Over there beyond that wind was the blessed timber. And this time, when he reached it, he'd stay there. It wasn't any use searching any longer. Cattle which might still be in some drift in the aspens would stay there—for good. And if he tried to locate and move anymore, he and Blaze would probably stay there too, until the warming sun of a distant spring would lift the white blanket from the swamps and disclose the victims it had so jealously taken and hidden.

He hadn't realized how far it was

across the swamps. Coming over this last time he had been searching for a final jag of cattle and the wind was at his back, besides. Distance moved underfoot unconsciously, that way. But now, just fighting that damned wind, that ceaseless smother of snow, it was long, and tough. And he was tired. God! How tired he was!

Be good to find a nice deep, soft drift and go to sleep. Sleep for a few hours, maybe—and then get up and go home. He nodded, a half frozen, drowsy grin on his grime thickened lips.

Then, deep in his brain was something almost like a thin jangle of warning. No sleep yet—no sleep here! No sleep until there was a roof and four walls and deep warm blankets. For a sleep here, in one of these drifts, would be a never ending sleep. It would be a sleep—forever.

Instinct was whipping Jimmy. Stupidly he began beating his arms against his sides. And Blaze, knowing the truth about snow and freezing wind and shelter, bored on across the swamp.

The faithful horse stopped, reaching a sniffing head downward. And in the dazed mechanical consciousness he still held, Jimmy realized there was a hint of bulk down there, a hint of movement. Not much, but a little.

Somehow he got out of the saddle and brushed away the snow. And in a thick, aimless way began to mumble. "A bummer—a poor little lone bummer. Like to missed you, I did. But ol' Blaze, he's smart, he is. He knew. Now I think I got enough left—I think I have—"

Someway he did it. He got the calf up and across the saddle and then climbed up himself and held the half frozen little creature in his arms. And Blaze went on and carried them into the timber.

Then it was down hill and the cursed wind could only howl its thwarted fury through the tops of the timber. But down here it was still and almost warm, by comparison with the bleak arctic desert of the aspen swamps. And the snow couldn't drift and old Blaze was making easier going of it.

And bye and bye there was vague movement ahead and you caught up

with some of the cattle, drifting down through the shelter of the timber to safe haven below. And when you put the little bummer down once more, the little cuss could walk and keep up with the other critters, for the grown stock broke trail through the leveled snow for the little cuss to get through.

And then, for no sane reason at all, you whooped and hollered and laughed, and shook a half frozen fist at the moaning timber tops, because you'd licked the damn storm and saved those cattle.

It was daylight again when Jimmy Lister woke up. Very hazily he remembered old Blaze stopping at the door of his log stable. He remembered crawling from the saddle and stripping the gear from Blaze and letting the good old boy into the warmth of the stable. And he had filled the manger with hay before stumbling off to the cabin. He remembered getting out his clothes and boots and tumbling into the blankets. After that all was a blank.

He was so stiff and sore he could hardly get out of the blankets and build up a fire. But the warmth from the stove reached deep and comforting and he realized he was half starved. And after he had eaten he realized that the storm had stopped and that outside all was still and white. And then came the idea that sent his blood tumbling hot and determined through his veins. He put on his fleece lined coat, went out, saddled up old Blaze and headed around the timber slope and down toward the line camp cabin at Dead Man. Hunk Dolan would be there, half or wholly drunk in all probability. But that wouldn't make any difference. He had done Dolan's job for him. Now he would take his pay. For that, and in memory of that fact that Dolan had called him a yellow little coward.

Hunk Dolan had visitors. There were three saddled broncs standing in front of the cabin.

Buck Whitton was there, and Jack Humphries, his foreman, and Speedy Blair. And Hunk Dolan.

Buck Whitton scowled at Jimmy. "What the hell do you want?" he growled.

"Room and a free hand," said Jimmy, almost brightly.

He was doffing his fleece jacket as he spoke. And as it dropped to the floor he leaned across the table and slapped Hunk Dolan's face.

Dolan blurted a startled curse, lurched to his feet. Buck Whitton grabbed Jimmy by the arm. "Wait a minute—wait a minute!" he rumbled wrathfully. "What the devil do you think you're up to? What right you got to come in here and—?"

"Listen, Whitton," said Jimmy calmly—his eyes fixed steadily on Hunk Dolan—"three or four days ago I warned Dolan that the blizzard was going to hit and that he'd better get the last of that summer herd of yours out of the aspen swamps on north Baldy. He told me to mind my own business, called me a yellow little coward and cussed me out in general. Well, the storm hit and I put in one hell of a day yesterday up on Baldy getting those cows of yours out of the swamps and into the timber. With this freeze that's set in they'd all been dead by this time if I hadn't rooted them out and to safety.

"I didn't do it for you, because I don't owe you a cussed thing. I did it because a four footed dumb brute deserves a better break than to be left to freeze through the negligence of a drunken, dirty mouth whelp like Mister Hunk Dolan. So I came over here today to sort of teach Dolan that it pays to be true to your hire and to show him who's a yellow backed coward. You better turn me loose, because I aim to finish the chore I just started."

Jimmy tried to pull away, but Buck Whitton, big as a barn and half as wide, held him easily. "Just a minute," growled Whitton. "I been wanting to find out the truth about those cows."

"He's lying!" snarled Hunk Dolan. "He's lying in his teeth. Like I already told you, I got the last of the cattle off Baldy back the first of the week."

"No!" thundered Buck Whitton. "Lister ain't lying, Dolan. You are. Me and Jack and Speedy, we passed some of those cows on our way up here. Any man could tell they'd been drifting down country all night, yet they hadn't got any farther than Pell Creek. Had they been started down back when you claim, they'd have been

plumb in the valley by today. I been watching you close and giving you rope to hang yourself, knowing you were lying all the time. All right, Lister—now you can go for him. And if you don't make a job of it, I'll take up where you leave off. For any man in a position of trust who thinks more of a whiskey jug than he does of his job, is a rat. Go get him!"

Jimmy went around the table like an eager, battle mad terrier. And Hunk Dolan, a good thirty pounds heavier, aimed a ponderous blow calculated to knock Jimmy's sandy head clear off his shoulders. But Jimmy went in under the punch and sank his own right fist wrist deep into Dolan's flabby stomach.

DOLAN gasped and sagged and Jimmy hit him in the face with an overhand right that packed all of Jimmy's wiry hundred and fifty pounds behind it and Dolan, as he staggered back against the stove, lips pulped and bleeding, knew that he had plenty of fight on his hands.

He clawed for Jimmy and got hold of him. And he began mauling his smaller and lighter adversary around with clumsy strength. He aimed another blow that would have scalped Jimmy had it landed, but once more Jimmy managed to get just under the whizzing fist. And this time he sank both fists into Dolan's mid-riff.

He could feel his man wince under this punishment so Jimmy dug in for Dolan's body, whining with eagerness. And then Buck Whitton and the others viewed the spectacle of the little rider they had branded as yellow, driving his larger opponent all around the cabin, from one wall to the other and back again.

"Go it!" Buck rumbled. "Go it, you little scratch cat! Pound his dirty heart out!"

Jimmy didn't hear Whitton. He didn't hear anything. He just kept on flailing away at Dolan's shrinking, shuddering mid-riff.

Jimmy wasn't getting off scot free by any means. Hunk Dolan, kept continually off balance, could not punch straight. But he pounded down at Jimmy's bobbing head and shoulders with fists like post mauls and not all of the blows missed. Most of those blows landed on Jimmy's shoulders

and even so they hurt, deep down, in a sodden, dead sort of way. And one which caught Jimmy's head just a glancing blow, nearly did his business for him. Jimmy had his man against a wall at the time and so was able to lean on him until the stars and sky-rockets quit buzzing around. Yet all the time Jimmy kept on pumping his fists into Dolan's body.

And that got Dolan finally. Dolan had been keeping his agony locked behind set, snarling teeth. Now those set teeth parted to let out a shuddering groan, and Dolan began to sag. He no longer tried to throw punches himself. He folded both arms across his suffering body as a shield. So Jimmy spread his feet, set himself and began lifting his punches to Dolan's unprotected jaw.

Four times he hit him, five, then a final lifting right hand smash which Jimmy brought up clear from his knees. It landed with the smack of a breaking board and Dolan's knees buckled and he slid to the floor.

"All right," Jimmy gulped. "All right. If any of the rest of you want to start that yellow backed coward talk, they can have just what Dolan's got!"

Buck Whitton's leonine grin became a chuckle. He lifted his hands and spread them in a gesture of defense. "Lord no!" he growled. "Not me. I'd sooner take on a wounded lynx cat."

Jack Humphries swore in awed wonder. "Make it five wounded lynx cats, Buck. Look at Dolan, would you! He's plumb ruined!"

Jimmy nearly fell down as he reached for his fleece jacket. The reaction was setting in now and only his burning pride kept him from joining Dolan on the floor. Again it was Whitton who took him by the arm and forced him down on the edge of the cabin bunk.

"You stay there," Whitton rumbled gruffly. "I want to talk to you later. Jack, you and Speedy get that whelp of a Dolan up and traveling. Tell him I'll leave his time at the Glow Worm in town. And after he's collected it, he better leave for new country. Or I'll take on where this little hunk of dynamite left off. Though I know I couldn't do near as good a job."

Jack Humphries and Speedy Blair dragged Dolan to the door and outside, where they rolled him in the freeze crusted snow until he got his battered wits back. After which Humphries led him away to get his horse saddled up, while Speedy bundled up Dolan's war bag and carried it out.

BUCK WHITTON sat down on the bunk beside Jimmy. "If you're going to offer me a job again, I don't want it," rapped Jimmy. "From now on I'm working for myself."

"How many cattle did you get out of those aspen swamps?"

Jimmy hesitated. "I wasn't counting very good towards the last," he admitted. "I'd guess right around a hundred and fifty. Why?"

"I try to be a fair man," rumbled the big cattleman. "When I'm wrong I ain't afraid to say so and I always pay my debts. I was wrong in firing you and the boys and me were wrong when we classed you as yellow. That's part of it. The rest is this. If it hadn't been for you I'd have lost all those cattle. Well, I'm satisfied to have half of them back. Come spring, I'm expecting you down on the main range. I'm wanting you to pick out seventy-five head of young breeding stock and

I'll throw in a good breed bull to boot. You register yourself a brand and we'll vent to that brand. That will give you a pretty fair start."

Jimmy's heart leaped at the prospect, but his pride was still flaming. "I don't want charity from you or nobody else, Buck Whitton—"

"Listen, shrimp!" Buck Whitton's voice was an ominous growl, but far back in his eyes a twinkle was showing. "I'm not taking charity from you, either. You saved a hundred and fifty head of cattle for me, when you'd have been justified in letting 'em die, just to spite me. I ain't taking that kind of charity. This is a plain business deal. You get half what you saved for me. And you better take the deal and shut up, or I'll twist your cussed neck for you. Understand?"

He cleared his thickened throat, and looked long at Buck Whitton. "All right, Buck," he said. "I can't turn it down. Something like that means too much to me. And—you're damned white—Buck."

Buck Whitton dropped a hand on Jimmy's knee that nearly paralyzed him. "You're not exactly off-color yourself, son," the cattleman growled. "Now I wonder if there's any more hot java in that pot?" ● END

THE BIG SMASH

ter, you're hurt! Your left arm—it's all blood—"

"Just a gash I think." He looked back and saw that Quade was stirring, trying to rise. "I'll have to get back there. We can make him tell the miners how things were in this deal. Some court will have to decide how the money's to be divided, but I'll see that they all get what they've earned."

"Yes, Mark." Ann plucked at his sleeve and pointed. Sabra was out of the carriage and running, brush and cactus tearing at her fine clothing, lugging two of the carpetbags. A futile thing, Mark thought at once. Money was what she thought she wanted, but it was a useless thing. The real values in life were elsewhere.

"We'll catch her after I've tied up Quade," he said, getting down from the carriage. "We'll have to go back to Bonanza City Ann, and take care of Ben and Sam."

She nodded. She kept watching him,

(continued from page 49)

seeming to wait for him to say something more.

"I thought I was a pretty big noise, once," he told her. "But I've found out it isn't my style. I'll get another job somewhere. Mucker or powder-monkey, it doesn't matter. I want to sweat for my wages again."

"Yes, Mark, I know."

He looked at her curiously. Sabra had never belonged here in the West, but Ann did. She would face up to the problems of the frontier, not try to dodge behind a shelter of money and the comforts it could buy. He wondered why he had told her his plans. It wasn't possible that Mark Sandrey could fall in love with another woman so soon, yet deep within him he knew that it would come to be.

Ann knew it too. A serene something in her eyes said that she knew, and that she would be content to wait.

● END

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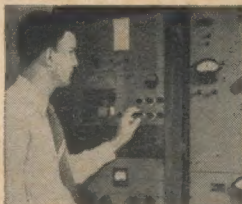
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